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**Reality in Virtual Learning:
Challenges without the Classroom**

by

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Reality in Virtual Learning: Challenges without the classroom

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WORK-IN-PROGRESS-PAPER

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Introduction

The development of ITC has increased focus onto distance learning programs worldwide. Most universities today offer distance learning programs that are based on the Internet. This development represents a fundamental change in the very logic of being a university. It is no longer enough to rely on professor authority. How can one create a learning situation that enables the university to remain viable?

In most western countries, the professors have dominated the learning processes at universities. Since the 50-ties, learning has been about learning-in, memorizing, and cram (Illeris, 2000) where professors most often decide what and when one could learn by providing the context and substance. In this perspective, the student has a role which is close to the one of a passive receiver, and s/he is mainly preoccupied with the problem of generating substance in memory most efficiently.

Today, technology challenges our pedagogical reasoning in many ways. However, old pedagogical models often prevail. We see practices where lectures, notes and course information are published on the Internet, where ICT helps professor-student communication, and online based student tests. These attempts are based on old-time educational logic. There are fewer attempts to use ICT according to a different pedagogical perspective than the old professor authoritarian model.

The *purpose* of this paper is to illuminate some challenges virtual students experience when facing a new ICT-based learning situation. We will try to explore and develop understandings of what it might mean to be a student when learning occurs within a virtual problem based learning landscape. When students are used to the traditional classroom, challenges appear in the twilight zone between two pedagogical practices. How do the students cope with challenges that a new virtual program demands, and what paradoxes and ambiguities appear when old learning processes do not work anymore?

The present focus reflects an existential-phenomenological point of departure. This perspective is based on the philosophical writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger (1927/1996; “Being and Time”), and the successors Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur. The work is also inspired of the father of culturalism – Jerome Bruner (1996) and Wenger’s (1998) community of practice. Thompson (1997) is an inspiration through his initiator of hermeneutical endeavor within consumer research.

The consequences of this perspective are that the student and his/her experiences and learning cannot be separated from the student’s existence. As for the subject matter, we cannot separate the student from his/her studying. Learning becomes a profoundly socio-cultural process which has to be studied according to the situation and context in which it appears. It is the heart of this project that the twilight zone between cultural roles might reveal some interesting knowledge about the introduction of ICT and its consequences.

The socio-cultural conditions of present society set the context for the hermeneutic analysis of meanings and salient life concerns that learning experiences hold for time-pressured virtual students with high degree of responsibilities. An existential-phenomenological assumption is that individuals would tend to interpret their experiences within present socio-cultural framework. Due to its novel characteristics of the program, however, it is particularly interesting to investigate the role that virtual studying serves in the construction of reality and meaning. Furthermore, as it is assumed that experiences cannot be separated from who one is (being-in-the world), the process

of human change during virtual studying is also expected to influence salient types of learning, the student's work practice, and his/her private practice.

The virtual learning space (VLS)

This paper reports from an empirical research project at Copenhagen Business School, Center of Market Economics (CME), which is named "Reality in Virtual Learning". The project became interesting due to CME's strategic choice of developing a virtual master program. The purpose is to offer a part time program which everyone could join, independent of geographic residence, and to some extent time, because it is based on participation through the Internet.

"The Virtual Learning Space" (VLS), partly developed at CME, graduate (HD A/U) students currently use as their main frame of reference during two years. The VLS consists of (1) The SiteScape¹, where all communication between students and professors takes place, and (2) "The Terminal Server", which contains several official and commercial databases and other material that is needed throughout the learning processes. The VLS context is what I have in mind when I hereafter address the virtual program, virtual learning, or simply virtual studying.

The master program is based on the pedagogical ideal of problem identification. This means that the structure and substance of the program are built upon several business problems or challenges that the students shall work with. In the beginning, the business challenges are more explicitly formulated than during later stages of the program. The professors would initially control the direction of the learning process to some extent. However, the ideal is to make the students capable to take care of the entire process of problem identification. Consequently, students confront a fairly demanding and unstructured case already the 1st semester. A final project deals with real problem identification – usually closely connected to the business or industry where they work.

¹ Sitescape is the chosen system for meeting place on the Internet. For instance, discussion rooms, project rooms, links, chat rooms, etc.

The pedagogical perspective of problem based learning and problem identification through the VLS changes what it means to be a student. From the CME brochure (HD Afsætningsøkonomi, Udenrigshandel, 2001) the following changes are emphasized:

- Teaching is history - and learning is the focus, which changes
- the roles of students and professors, because
- the professor becomes a coach who is supportive (rather than an oracle),
- and the student does not meet a teaching process with an a priori decided structure.
- Thus, the students focus on problem identification instead of problem solving,
- and this is more in line with the reality of the post-industrial society, which could be
- described as dynamic, complex, and without any core logic.

The core idea of problem identification is then the need to train students in facing an unpredictable, complex and dynamic reality. While we all have been preoccupied with theories about phenomena, the CME-professors ideal is to start out with an identification process which most likely end up with experiences that problems often are a complex composition across disciplines. It is then not the toolbox (theory and models) that decides the problems and solutions. The identification process does. And during this process the ability to analyze the socio-cultural situation and context becomes crucial.

Virtual students around the world

The students in CME's virtual program are mostly younger Danish people living either abroad or in Denmark. Although the group must be regarded as heterogeneous, most of them have work to attend to in addition to their studying. Many have also responsibilities as mothers and fathers. This indicates that one could portray a virtual student as one with competing life goals and high degree of responsibilities. Interviews with CME-professors also indicate that many students have a time-pressured lifestyle. One could expect that many find themselves in a situation where the ability to compromise between roles is necessary.

Although the participants reside in different countries, investigations show that the virtual students are situated with a similar set of cultural directedness and meaning. They are all Danish; a great majority has an educational background from Danish universities and has been raised within a mutual set of beliefs and values. They are all

socialized into a student role which is very different from the one they are presently experiencing.

Virtual students are more responsible for the learning process than ordinary students because there are no lectures. This means that learning could be more emotional as compared to the safe and comfortable learning processes that most students experience inside the classroom. Most students report frustration when it comes to experiences the pace (e.g. exams, reading too little) although deciding one's own pace is supposed to be an important advantage for virtual students (see the web site of CME; <http://www.mic.cbs.dk/>). On the other hand, the emotional pace – if one is able to work in a regular manner – may turn to something positive when one feels “up to it” and feels a progression towards one's goals. Nevertheless, increased emotional learning seems to have consequences for one's private sphere. Several report periods of instability due to heavy burdens when e.g. time limits for handing in various assignments are coming up. An ultimate emotional reaction through angst and despair is reported when one is not able to cope with the different roles of life (e.g. work, family, school).

The hermeneutic research procedures

The framework for the sampling procedure was as follows. First, the student list constituted the framework for choosing participants for the study. Second, the manager of CME contacted everyone by placing project information and a request for participation onto the SiteScape. A list of positive participants was created throughout this process. Surprisingly, a majority of the group gave positive feedback. After this, the following purposive sampling criteria were followed:

- Marital status (family/single), sex, children
- Place of residence (in Denmark or abroad)
- Active users of the VLS²
- Position (work or home)

It was important to contact a heterogeneous group of students in order to investigate nuances in relation to the lived meaning of student reality. The highly contextual focus

² Being “active” is related to the login frequency (SiteScape). One is not only considered active if one is often participating in discussions. It became clear that many students spend time searching in databases and reading discussions. Some may even base their learning on such “passive” studying.

has also been important due to the thick descriptions that one can expect when chosen participants belong to a varied spectrum of social life. By investigating the students' own descriptions of themselves (on the SiteScape) it was possible to identify most of the demographic characteristics identified above. In addition, conversations at CME aided this process.

Individuals were contacted by e-mail. I presented the project and myself and asked if they were willing to participate in a CME-sponsored research project seeking to gain understanding with regards to "reality in virtual learning". It was emphasized that we were interested in the lived meaning of being a virtual student, and furthermore, that the purpose of the empirical study was to conduct research from their point of view (implicitly not according to a theory).

	Sex, age,	Marital status, children	Place of residence (Denmark/abroad)	Work/home
Edgar	M, 32	single, no	abroad	work
Susan	F, 39	married, yes	abroad	home
Henry	M, 32	married, yes	abroad	work
Betty	F, 34	married, yes	abroad	home
Oskar	M, 29	single, no	Denmark	work
Lisa	F, 33	single, yes	Denmark	work
Erik	M, 28	single, no	Denmark	work
Amy	F, 33	married, yes	Denmark	home

Table 1: Profile of the participants

Eight 1st year students, who attended the HD virtual program second half of 2001, were selected according to the criteria described above. They were assured full anonymity and offered a signed consent form. They were told that the researcher would conduct all the interviews and that no other would be allowed access to the verbatim transcriptions from the audio taped interviews. The following research phases were outlined:

Phase 1: Fieldwork

When: Fall 2001

Purpose: To gain contextual and cultural fore-understanding about the phenomenon.

Method: (1) Investigations of the VLS-environment that the students are using, (2) informal talk with CME professors and former students, (3) reading brochures, web sites, and other available material, (4) joining the professors during information meeting (with potential students).

Interesting questions: What does it mean to be a virtual student? What is significant? What attitudes and images are symbolized by CME? How are students prepared? What are the typical demographic and existential characteristics of a virtual student? What kind of motives and expectations do virtual students have?

Phase 2: Inter-view 1: Phenomenological interview

When: Early 2002

Purpose: To understand *what* they do, *how* they do, and *why* they do (cf. chronological events and coherence meaning in next section).

Inter-view type: Course of dialogue largely set by the participants. Following chronological events as much as possible. Active listening with follow-up questions. Use minidisc recorder.

Focus: Initial question: "Can you describe what it means to be a virtual student? How does one interpret the virtual learning situation? What significant events take place?"

Phase 3: Writing diary

When: Spring/summer 2002

Purpose: To receive an understanding of chronological events during their study. This sequential knowledge is important for later conversations and interpretations.

Method: Students have received a pre-structured framework, which is e-mailed to the researcher. E-mailed approx. every other week or so.

Interesting questions: What has happened? Learning activities? Personal aspects? Reflections?

Phase 4: Inter-view 2: Hermeneutic interview

When: Fall 2002

Purpose: To develop alternative lived meaning interpretations together with the participants. Enter the process of distancing. The researcher tries to facilitate - and to

focus on - breaks. This is done with a view to the prior research phases and socio-cultural roles and meaning, which are developed. The researcher presents assumptions so far.

Inter-view type: Semi-structured with a more active researcher. Focus on co-creating and negotiating interpretations.

Interesting questions: Reinterpretations of previous interpretations. The question of identity, change in horizon, evolvment of directedness, consequences at work and for the private sphere, and development of the concept of learning.

It was expected that several of the participants would be able to distance themselves from immediate interpretations already during phase 3 (inter-view 1) because I expect them to have a well-developed language as graduate students. Earlier experiences also show that well-educated participants are often open to discuss complex and personal topics (Lindberg, 2001).

Hermeneutics of suspicion

It has been a critique of especially existential research that it fails to provide a sufficient historical and socio-cultural context to the reported lived meanings (Thompson, 1996). This project attempts to dismiss any such critique by focusing on two layers of contexts: (1) the socio-cultural frame of reference, which has been discussed earlier, and (2) the particular lifeworld within which the individual virtual student is situated. The lifeworld context cannot be anticipated a priori. During the empirical work, however, the psychosocial framework developed by May (1983), and further elaborated by Deurzen-Smith (1988/1995), has guided the investigations. On an analytic level, the questions of what lived meanings the virtual studying holds for the individual and how experiences are related to other aspects of the student's lifeworld, have been pursued through a conception of lifeworld as consisting of four simultaneous aspects: (1) Umwelt (life with dependencies), (2) Mitwelt (life with others), (3) Eigenwelt (life with subjective realities), and (4) Überwelt (life with ideas and criteria).

It is important for an existential-phenomenological researcher to try to disengage the participant from the ordinary connectedness toward the world – and co-create a different

reality together with the participant. In this case, the point of departure would be to disclose the roles which one relies on; e.g. as a student. Prior experiences with this process of distancing have been varying because not everyone is ready for viewing oneself from alternative, and often strange, perspectives (see Lindberg, 2001). It is an ethical responsibility of the researcher to be careful during the process of distancing.

The research phases described above indicated various levels of interpretation. Due to the suspicious scope of this study, the interpretation of meanings is divided into three groups:

1. Chronological expressions (about events, what they do) are primarily meanings that constitute means to an end to the researcher's later interpretations. For instance, - what one does during a day.
2. Coherence interpretation is configurations of chronological events as related to lifeworld structures (also referred to as plots/intrigues). A further investigation and interpretation into chronological expressions is necessary in order to make sense and understand e.g. why one engages in activities and why a certain manner of conduct is chosen.
3. Suspicious interpretation is created when the researcher and the participant are able to disclose the concealed by entailing a suspicious attitude toward the chronological occurrences and coherence meanings. This is done by questioning the socio-cultural horizon(s) that permeate a student's lifeworld and role. This means that the directedness of a student also needs to be challenged, - perhaps by alternative and/or novel perspectives.

A solitary method is not enough when seeking suspicious meaning through a process of distancing. It is simply not possible to create the enriched lifeworld gestalt that is necessary for an existential-phenomenological interpretation. The first inter-view would usually provide knowledge about conduct (chronological expressions) and more common understanding regarding the phenomenon in question. The rationale for the second inter-view is then to develop several narratives about both lifeworld gestalts and distanced interpretations of meanings as compared to the first inter-view and the diary. The creation of alternative meanings is therefore important to the second inter-view. The hermeneutic interpretation permeates all phases of the empirical work. A continuous iterative process of interpretation between the whole; e.g. the lifeworld of the student, and the part; e.g. the types of learning, is important for an existential-phenomenological project. The sense of the whole is rather important for the coherence interpretations since the lifeworld gestalt often provides a novel dimension of a phenomenon (and vice versa). During this iterative process, the researcher would look for meaningful contrasts, paradoxes, ambiguities, metaphors, and linkages that could be interesting among the virtual learning realities investigated.

Validity and reliability

The question of validity and reliability is often difficult to handle because the terms change as compared to hypothetico-deductive research. Obviously, a belief in person-world fusion, reality as constructed, and the hermeneutics of suspicion means a different conception of validity as compared to the ideal of being value-free and seeking objective truth. Validity within existential-phenomenological research would primarily mean to be considerate to the (existential-phenomenological) paradigm, person-world fusion, and the process of distancing. Consequently, to justify my interpretations I use four criteria: (1) Paradigmatic validity, (2) suspicious validity, (3) communicative and pragmatic validity (Kvale, 1989), and (4) reliability as interpretive awareness (Sandberg, 1994).

Paradigmatic validity involves being preoccupied with consistency. Inspired from Anderson (1986) and Ingebrigtsen & Pettersson (1979), this means that consistency must exist between the different layers of the existential-phenomenological paradigm; i.e. ontology, epistemology, and methodology. However, the existential-phenomenological ontology is the point of departure, which I have tried to account for throughout this chapter. As compared to hypothetico-deductive research, the method does not receive supreme importance anymore. Instead, the ontology does. The emphasis in this project has involved both conceptual- and empirical scrutiny. Conceptually, I have tried to account for the (logic) consequences of chosen ontology for epistemology (i.e. seeking knowledge of when participants are truthful) and methodology (procedures suitable for constructing truthfulness). On an empirical level, I have tried to design research phases that would allow for an investigation on both a socio-cultural level (first inter-view) and on a more truthful level (inter-view 2). Also, I hope that investigations through the diary would aid this process.

Suspicious validity involves the manner in which the research is able to account for the participant as being more truthful. At this point of the research, this is not possible simply because only one inter-view is accomplished. However, I will try to account for this criterion by showing how participants are changed throughout the research process.

I will try to develop the line of argument by presenting quotations from the various conversations.

Communicative and pragmatic validity are drawn from Kvale (1989). Communicative validity involves a process where alternative knowledge claims are debated throughout the research process. In this project, I tried to enrich my own understanding through an initial field study where the logics of the virtual program and being a virtual student were the main concern. This is important for understanding what the participants actually are talking about, and being able to ask follow-up questions to ensure that I understand the student's lived meanings. Furthermore, the construction of trust between the virtual students and me has been important. For instance, I have spent a lot of time trying to inform the participants about the project. Interchange of knowledge has probably been the most important aspect of communicative validity so far. Pragmatic validity involves testing the knowledge produced in action. This is achieved by focusing on their doings as virtual students during the first inter-view. Those I visited at home would show me their office, and I have also visited the VLS with an aim of understanding how the discussions could proceed. We have also focused on the group processes that are a rather important pedagogical aspect of the CME virtual program. Furthermore, it has been important, and still is, to focus on the practical aspects of a statement. This would often signify a follow-up question where the interviewee is asked to provide practical examples of what one has just stated.

Reliability as interpretive awareness means acknowledging that researchers cannot escape from their interpretations throughout a research project (Sandberg, 2000). It demands that a researcher accounts for how one deals with one's fore-understanding. This is a delicate matter since one has to develop a consciousness and sensitivity toward one's own fore-understanding and manner of interpretation throughout the process. A critique toward interpretive practice is often that researchers are too inductive oriented. Inspired from the phenomenological reduction, often known practically as "bracketing" (Giorgi, 1985), I tried to withhold my fore-understanding during the first inter-view. This is of course impossible as such, and the only feasible way out of this dilemma is by resuming a background position during conversations. This means that I strived to ask

only initial, open questions so that the direction of the conversation was decided, as far as possible, by the interviewee. This would also mean to treat every statement as equally important during the conversation. It was important for me to try to withhold my own preconceptions about virtual studying. In the second inter-view, however, interpretive awareness through bracketing will not be maintained. Then, a more discursive and suspicious attitude will be idealized in order to develop alternative meanings. The existential-phenomenological perspective will then resume its position as the mainframe for interpretations.

Learning as logics

Learning as phenomenon can be regarded as consisting of three different processes (Illeris, 2000): (1) Process of interplay between individual and his/her world, (2) psychological process of appropriation and processing (processing substance), and (3) a psychodynamic process which mobilizes energy and thus characterizes the process as such. All these processes are important for learning, and all reductionistic attempts cannot claim to cover learning as a holistic phenomenon. Some may argue, for instant, that psychodynamic aspects are important since individual experiences, emotions and motivations seem crucial for the meaning that each student ascribe to the learning as such. Other may argue that formal, substance based, learning is important which reflects a belief in the psychological process of receiving knowledge. Yet others view learning as a social practice in the world where it is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This is how some may idealize the classroom (focus on the psychological process), learning in practice (focus on the psychodynamic importance), or everyday learning (focus on the individual-world interplay).

Logic of learning is understood as a specific arrangement with regards to the above processes of Illeris (2000). Certain logic of learning signifies a certain process of interplay or sociality (1), certain cognitive processes (2) and psychodynamic processes (3). Thus, the process model lack a *meta-theoretical layer* (4) which reflect the world view, view of human nature, and epistemological aspects implicit with the logic. For instance, a process of learning based on teaching reflects a certain belief in the psychological process of receiving knowledge. The social and emotional dimensions

could be considered less important. Today, such learning logic is e.g. found when we want to memorize knowledge. So, the manner of learning logic that is present partly also depends on the *situation and context* (5). However, we see examples of learning processes based on a certain logic even though the situation call for a different logic. The system or belief of persons could then be vital for the choice of learning process.

We would argue with Jarvis (1992) that learning first and foremost is interesting because it has something to do with human existence. This means that learning as such is an ontological question; to be human is to learn. This position means that processes of learning and various logics of learning *have consequences for existence and vice versa*. While we have pointed at learning as something that happens in the classroom or as reading textbooks, as a process, and finally as a logic, we will here also argue that learning fundamentally is an ontological concept.

Wenger (1998) suggests a “social theory of learning” consisting of learning as (1) belonging (*community*), (2) learning as doing (*practice*), (3) becoming (*identity*), (4) experiences (*meaning*). Participation, and especially in communities, shapes not only what we do (practice), but also who we are (identity) and how we interpret what we do (meaning) (p. 4). One could argue that our belonging to community is important for logics of learning which again will have consequences for practice, identity and meaning. In this work the focus will primarily be on experiences and meaning, but in so doing we would still imply their practice, community and questions of identity.

From formal education to virtual reality

The traditional school model of learning is built on two assumptions that are supposed to ensure optimal learning (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). First, it is assumed that learning involves loading up people’s brains with information. Second, learning is supposed to occur in the context of formal education events like a classroom or on-line teaching environments. The consequence hereof must be that life itself with its meaning constructions appear when one is able to apply the knowledge that has been loaded into one’s brain.

However, learning is much more than this. It is actually an integral part of life and our meaning constructions. It depends on our social relations just as it relies on focus that a certain culture provides. Learning is therefore often hidden in-between our daily doings and is a product of interrelations depending on many activities. We may only reflect about our own childhood of socialization at work. It is evident that learning often takes place in other contexts than the traditional classroom.

Students and professors must change when the formal educational systems apply other approaches to learning than the traditional one. Because the phenomenon of problem based virtual programs is new, any culturally manifested student role cannot be expected yet. Results show that students are aware of the difference between the old and the new student role. They reveal different challenges and problems with the new way of studying.

The results indicate several virtual roles. Plurality exists more than conformity. In the beginning the traditional (mass) student role still prevails to some extent. Most students would be, at least in early stages of the learning process, structured around specific subjects and oriented towards the logics of receiving knowledge. They focus on static theories and models and on solving pre-identified problems. We would argue that the lack of a clear virtual student role make some students fall back to the comfortable role, while others endure in the twilight zone between roles. However, to exist in twilight zone means experiences of challenges, paradoxes and ambiguities.

After being a virtual student for a while, the new high-end, virtual logic would force the students to change. Sooner or later they may meet frustration if they cannot depart from the mass student directedness. Despite the fact that many people today are used to computers and the Internet, the manner in which technology is combined with new pedagogical practice would simply demand a different manner of being directed as student.

In an initial phase of the program, many students do not experience the virtual program as being virtual in the same sense as the professors at CME do. Students would exist in a twilight zone between the roles of being mass students and virtual students.

To learn in a virtual context is experienced as multi-faceted and intense. Students experience multiple learning contexts in contrast to the dominant lecture room. And the appearances of these various learning contexts are not sequential. They appear in a multi-tasking or shifting foreground-background manner. This is how one could argue the students experience an intensified learning process when compared to traditional learning. One could illustrate such multi-faceted and intense process by imagining a student who is reading two articles, communicating with fellow students and coaches over the net, searching in online databases, and joining group discussions online – all during one day.

Søren Porskrog, a former virtual student, points to the challenge of being able to read independently. “In contrast to the [ordinary program] one is supposed to learn by reading – and not by being told or through the black board. It has for me been quite a challenge.” (HHK, Videre- og efteruddannelse, 2001: 13). This quote indicates what virtual studying means for student responsibility as such. It is demanding because one has to become active and decisive towards one own learning process. Reading the curriculum must e.g. receive new meaning since there is no aid in a lecture. One is left alone somehow. Increased responsibility may become an isolated endeavor. There is need for a certain student initiative, and many students account for challenges with the increased freedom. One could argue that the school-promoted freedom through the Time-Place-Pace concept often is not answered by an increased responsibility by the students.

A majority of the virtual students are positive and enthusiastic toward the use of technology. Several are quite competent in using technology in various situations. Consequently, learning through computers becomes an absorbed normality quite fast. We shall see that several speak of the relationship in a bodily fashion. The embodied characteristic would also distinguish the use-situations; i.e. there would be a certain

intimacy between the student and the technology, which could be important for the student's self-understanding.

Students report alienation and frustrating periods. Some are simply not comfortable with the VLS-technology. One does not know how to act and ends up doing nothing online. Later in the program, several report frustration because the VLS framework is too time consuming. The amount of information is simply overwhelming. They also complain about the meaningless discussions and contributions that characterize the various discussion groups. They are not at all satisfied with their fellow students. Unfolded rumors about certain students whom write all kinds of funny contributions online whir among students. Symbolic constructions about fellow students are common (without ever meeting them).

Change toward new student role

The professors focus extensively onto the ability to understand and accomplish problem identification. One could argue that this is the heart of the change from one role to another. If one is able to catch this logic it would have consequences for who one is and the way one focuses during virtual studying. Several indicate that the logic of problem identification has been cardinal for their change on several levels. It seems important for their ability to study virtually. Secondly, it has consequences for their work practice which indicate that the logic has become embodied to some extent.

During the first half year of the two-year program, many students experience frustration when they notice that theories and models do not work as intended. During projects they may find theories that they think will provide solutions to their problems. Frustrations appear when they experience that they don't. The problem may be too complex or the situation and context may be of a kind which is not accounted for anywhere in the literature. The confidence toward theories as such are reduced dramatically. They cannot rely on answers available in books and articles anymore. This is experienced as strange. One could argue that the first indication of a process of change takes place.

At this stage, several professors at the program would argue that frustrated students have received a gift: They are onto the path of a different reality. The main brochure of CME also strongly indicates such understanding. It is actually several that argue that such a shift of perspective might be necessary to retain dignity as a student. So, frustration can be a positive experience then since it may trigger a necessary change toward a virtual student role. And frustration is accounted for:

“This first semester has been difficult and different. I have settled with previous habits.. from reading a book/article before lecture.. to find the essence.. cut that which is not important. And then the professor would help me on ‘the right track’. [Last semester] I have read, but the problem is that I have focused on the wrong things.. Now, we discuss what things mean, what is important.” (Erik, 2nd semester)

“It takes time to find the right focus. The working method is very different. It has taken nearly a year to adjust to the new logic.. how I shall relate to the different things.. for instance.. in the beginning I was facing angst when there were 30 unread messages [on SITESCAPE]. Now, I don’t mind if there are 180 unread messages.. and I don’t care.. Now I focus on the right things.” (Edgar, 3rd semester)

“I have had problems how to relate to theory this first semester.. for I have a hammer which I don’t know to use, and also the other way around – I may have experienced that I need a hammer – but I haven’t got it..” (Erik, 3rd semester)

In the second interview (during 3rd semester), several state they find comfort as virtual students. Several account for *SITESCAPE* as a “club”. They report connection and solidarity with fellow students and long to read messages from others. Some account for a “virtual world” of their own which consist of people they have never met (and will not meet).

Computers can be *addictive*. This has also been reported in this project. It is probably not the computer as such but communication with others.

“I have to plan to not log on.. must agree with myself... The program, the learning, to be together people this way – it becomes a habit. I have my little world, and I enjoy myself there.. there’s the conflict because I enjoy myself too much because I’d rather be there than with my partner.. not a very good sign..(Susan, mid 2nd semester)

Those that seem to master ICT tend to refer to it as a friend. They often receive strange comments from friends to the particular way of joining a master program. After one and a half semester several would agree with Susan:

“I don’t think this is a strange way to study anymore. I do not feel this as strange, extreme or timid. Unlike many – I am not afraid of my computer – on the contrary – it is more like my best friend.”

When change means loneliness

The phenomenon of problem identification is known for several students that work in private sector. Students nevertheless long for theory and the solid. They need the robust and the familiar. And this is easy to understand if one knows their history. Eventually, some understand the novel role which theory receives in problem identification. Some even account for how the whole perspective may rule as a life perspective. Some become able to obtain a critical perspective towards attitudes and practice at work.

“[The concept of problem orientation] provides a perspective which makes me able to identify stuff extremely fast.. many of my colleagues that have been here for many years.. their viewpoints are the same as when they graduated from school xx. What they have developed is a certain emotional approach [during decision making]. During this program I received new approaches (Eric, 3rd semester).

Some students become aware of their changed focus due to friction or break they meet at work. Some face challenges when relating to colleagues with certain educational background (e.g. engineers). Others find the proper colleagues to relate to:

-“When I talk to them [who have a certain educational background], it is a very different way to talk.. to communicate.. sometimes I have to be careful so I don’t rush away from the others..” (Edgar, 3rd semester)

-“If someone comes to me with a problem [in the firm] it is not sure that this is a problem..we need to sit down and ask ourselves again: what is the heart of this situation or case? I think 95% of the questions we ask are self-made due to a poor process of problem identification and analysis!” (Oscar, 3rd semester)

It becomes frustrating when colleagues do not support or simply do not listen to their new problem based logic. Those who have succeeded - in the meaning - being able to understand the usefulness of problem identification as students may meet trouble in their daily work situation. They are able to understand the connection between theoretical and practical knowledge but may receive challenges and problems when they want to introduce the logic at work.

Some students account for *loneliness* when co-students are not able to change. This is experienced during communication on the SITESCAPE. For instance, some focus on reading theory instead of focusing on problem analysis. This leaves the students in a vacuum without understanding each others. Accounts of doing “wrong things as

students”, “having different focus”, and “misunderstanding what is important” indicate different horizons. This complicates discussions and group work.

When change fails

When we confront worlds that dramatically depart from what we are used to, our horizon (understanding, meaning) are challenged and changed. Facing a new learning logic facilitates such dramatic change. For some this change is experienced as perverted because troubles are met throughout the process. Some even fail to change horizon when pervertedness seems insuperable.

We may all experience challenges when our normal roles do not work anymore. Depending on our ability to face such challenges, we may sooner or later face a new belonging (to the world) when we are normalized and find comfort in novel roles. For without normality and various clarified roles we cannot exist. However, the situation the students are facing signifies something else than our normal travel between everyday roles. The new role as virtual student is not clear.

It seems quite clear that most of the students had no idea about the new role when they applied and enrolled into the program. It was simply the most convenient manner of studying in their situations. The logic of the new way of studying was initially emphasized at an information meeting at Copenhagen Business School. It seemed that an information meeting was not enough. For in the beginning of the second semester, all of the participants argued that the learning process had not been what one expected. Some expected teaching over the net instead of normal classes. This is not surprising since it would only signify old methods in new wrapping.

“The three first weeks was really frustrating because I expected something to happened..it was difficult to understand how to start studying..what do they expect me to do? Shall I write something into the Sitescape..or..?” (Susan, 2nd semester)

The student freedom presumes responsible students. The coaches (teachers), who are online regularly every day, expect students to write messages when they need to. The Sitescape is organized according to the needs they had experienced during the first year (this course was the second). There are rooms specified for each subject, for projects

and for informal requests, etc. However, many students are afraid of communicating on the net.

“I am still (2nd semester) insecure when it comes to communication on SITESCAPE. They say: ‘if you mean that – write it’. But it works differently for me..because when I write I’m thinking: ‘God – they really think I mean that..but I simply want a discussion and develop my understanding. It will be on SITESCAPE for ever. Normally, one may change views during a conversation.. but here.. what I write remains online forever!’” (Betty, 2nd semester)

One could understand this as a kind of alienation. Some are alienated because they are not accustomed to ICT. There are groups that do not use the VSL framework at all. They read on their own and meet in groups more or less regularly. The program becomes a reading course with group meeting then. They are simply not up to changing. The ICT threshold is simply too high. They return to the old logic, and focus is put on reading and an intensive hunt for the essential stuff. When one or several group members live abroad (outside Denmark) the rest may meet off the record to learn from each other and to find comfort as alienated students. At this stage (2nd semester), several of the professors wonder why so few use the VSL-technology.

“We have heard that this program is different – but I need a bridge between the old and new logic.. because I am used to do things one way.. and all of a sudden.. what shall I do now?” (Amy, 2nd semester)

This is a statement of a student which has surrendered. Amy accounts for an understanding about the new learning logic, but she is not able to comply with a new horizon and directedness. She is not able to meaning without the normal classroom structure. What is important? What should I read? What do they expect us to do? So, while Amy expresses an understanding, her practice indicates that she really does not know anyway. One could argue there is conflict between her theory-in-use and espoused theories. She is conscious about the need to change into a new role, but she is unaware of her practice which indicates appliance to the old logic.

Early in the program, the business school put students into groups which are supposed to work together for a semester or so. Since this is a distance learning program, people from various places both in Denmark and abroad constitute the groups. They are supposed to communicate electronically only. However, groups choose to travel long distances and meet physically in secret although they have their own discussion rooms

on Sitescape. They simply need to physically meet due to the feeling of being lost in space. This creates conflicts within the group when students living abroad find out about this. They thought everything happened online.

Several expresses lack of *care*: There is no one to replace the lost teacher. Several lack the opportunity to e.g. clarify concepts and constructs, but cannot find comfort online.

“I am so insecure..I’m thinking..the concept insecure is so important because I feel so alone and insecure most of the time..so when I receive positive feedback..then everything turns fantastic..a simple feedback means much more in this context than normally” (Betty, 2nd semester)

So, the group members develop their own solutions: They develop care for each other. They find their new student role by defying business school instructions. They retain elements of the old logic: The lack of care is resolved through the telephone. So are the misunderstandings that appear as a consequence of not mastering the Sitescape. The lack of teaching and alienation online is compensated by more or less regular meetings in Copenhagen.

“One has to find out things oneself.. the anarchic aspect of the learning process made me anarchic and frustrated as a human being (Erik, 3rd semester)

All in all, it seems that the anarchic characteristic would lead to either drop out or falling back to a familiar role. Luckily, this did not result in a drop out.

Preliminary conclusion: Challenges without the classroom

We are normally absorbed through our doings. This means that we normally attend to roles and conform to the world of things and predetermined logics and meanings. According to the existential-phenomenological perspective, contemporary logics would also imprint our sense of self-awareness. One could argue that the logics of a culture aid individuals to interpret and narrate their experiences and meanings.

Understanding the reality of students is to understand the changes, and the view about changes, that the student faces. For when the world is changed – so is the student. Thus, an interesting question is then how the novel virtual conditions change the student and his/her reality. The change in being a student must be interpreted as a change with

regards to the student's horizon of understanding and meaning. It is in the twilight zones between various horizons that interesting research claims and concepts may be created.

Retaining Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning one may identify challenges across the dimensions 1) belonging, 2) practice, 3) becoming, and 4) meaning. The focus of this analysis has been experiential meaning qua the existential-phenomenological perspective.

All participants indicate an awareness of the potential role conflict between the culturally understood student-in-lecture-room and the novel student-in-virtual-room. A kind of meaninglessness predominate those that are not able to comply with ICT. Some students could not cope with the increased responsibility that followed freedom. Several faced *lack of meaning* during the first month of the program. They did not belong anywhere and had no structure and normality to cling to. This resulted in an experience of *alienation*.

It seems evident that a lot of challenges, paradoxes and ambiguities appear due to the twilight zone between role models. For instance, some students *refuse to become virtual* and create, instead, *quasi-virtual practices*. They are simply not up to a reality without social contact in a physical sense. The concept of *care* seems important: Several experienced no care within the virtual logic. Some student groups physically meet regularly, and other groups may be fragmented because two or more students meet without including the others.

Uncertainty is an experience that seems to deserve attention. Several students have reported that they suffer from an emotional state of uncertainty; some state that no one really care for them or understand their frustrations, and some feel trapped in the midst of technology. Or as one stated: "What if someone could ask me how things were going?". Some describe themselves as "information managers" who spend a considerable amount of time trying to sort valuable information/knowledge from the less valuable. Others suffer from "doing the wrong things".

Those who are able to comply with the virtual learning situation develop a becoming which could be characterized as *enrichment*. Several account for VSL as a “club”, and some even indicate various forms of *addiction* when it comes to the virtual community. The social roles which the virtual world implies remain a mystery however. It seems evident that the concepts of a friend and social life must be enlarged.

While the phenomenon of care has long traditions within the contexts of a lecture room, group work, and tutoring, it seems plausible to question what care for students might mean within a high-end virtual program. This is of course challenging if virtual students have difficulties changing from a traditional situatedness or role toward a virtual one. One preliminary conclusion would be, however, that providers of virtual programs would need to address this question carefully. For when the students might have difficulties in changing, it could ultimately become an institutional problem due to e.g. student drop-out and dissatisfied people.

The practical learning as doing seems an important consequence of the virtual program. The learning process implies more aspects of knowledge than mere theoretical knowledge. The most obvious is consequences for practical knowledge which also show to be demanding for some. When one is able to *embody a novel manner of horizon* it become difficult for some when colleagues belong to narrow horizons or refuse to discuss other possible practices. It is a challenge because one has become a different person while ones community refuses to change accordingly. The same phenomenon occur when fellow students e.g. during group work do not follow the same becoming. Either way – it is reported a *lonely experience*.

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