The Course as a Scientific Conference. Socialisation and Uncoverage in the Master's Programme Religious Roots of Europe

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the pedagogical concepts of *socialisation* and *uncoverage* and the theoretical perspective of *metanarratives* on history and historical concepts as tools to integrate the students of the online Master's programme Religious Roots of Europe into the practice of the historical study of religion. We describe how we worked in facilitating the typical learning processes and sociality of physical meetings at scientific conferences in the online teaching of a course about the early formation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Introduction

> An atheist, a lawyer, an Adventist preacher and an orthodox monk have breakfast in a hotel at the edge of the old city of Rome… What could be the beginning of an entertaining joke was actually my first encounter with Religious Roots of Europe. Having trained as a lawyer, I had applied to the Master's programme in order to gain a better understanding of the way in which the history of theology and religious thought has influenced our current understanding of law and society.

This passage is from the pen of a former student of the Master's programme Religious Roots of Europe (RRE) and illustrates well the diversity of skills and identities found among the students in the programme.

It also depicts how history is intertwined with people living and studying this history, and how learning is a social enterprise. Around the breakfast table, the students need to deal with both their personal and professional engagements, uncovering both their morning mood and interests not necessarily related to their studies. Some are young, having just finished a Bachelor's degree, but many are more mature students who have taken a break from a professional career in order to recharge competencies, perhaps to start an academic career. The meeting at a breakfast table gives room for both the informal and the formal, creating a shared space that soon will continue around the seminar table, where the conversation will be much more focused on one common topic, but with a stronger awareness of everyone's specific voice and contribution. In this sense, the encounter in Rome has similarities with a conference, during which scholars socialise in both lecture rooms and pubs, and where they uncover skills, but also something of their own personal and academic background.

But what happens when students cannot meet anymore or go to Rome on an excursion, as in the previous example, because of a pandemic? And similarly, what would happen if scholars were not able to meet at conferences anymore and socialise after having debated with one another? Are there ways in which distance learning tools can facilitate some of the aspects provided by physical meetings, and how so? In this paper, we consider two pedagogical concepts, *socialisation* and *uncoverage,* as ways to remedy the distance of distance learning, enhance social learning of skills and perspectives, and as such make a Master's course resemble a conference.

The Challenge: A Master's Programme Online

The RRE programme is a joint international Master's programme offered in a collaboration between the Universities of Lund, Copenhagen and Oslo. Students admitted to the programme are normally from Scandinavia, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Many have academic specialities in and personal connections to one of the three religions A significant

number of the students are highly ambitious and mature, with various kinds of work experience within related fields. As a result, the students seem to expect the courses to be settings that resemble an academy, and the programme's attraction as a stepping stone to further studies, both PhD and others, is evident among many admitted students.

The second course in the programme, *The Emergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (15 credits), which has been the object of the pedagogical development in this project, integrates Jewish Studies, Church History and Islamic Studies in its approach to the historical formation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Three teachers, one from each discipline, teach the course in cooperation and create a multidisciplinary base from which the students, often firmly based in one of these fields, may explore the others. The course has a distance learning design with one week of get-togethers in Lund for intensive teaching and learning in the form of lectures, seminars and other activities – a so-called compact seminar. The students know each other quite well when they start this course; they have already been on a two-week excursion to Rome together as a part of the first course in the programme, *The Study of Ancient Religion*. As in the rest of the programme, the interaction between the students – and between students and teachers – has been based on these physical meetings during excursions and compact seminars.

This model was profoundly challenged during the Covid pandemic, when all interaction and teaching moved online.[1] Without the physical meetings, the academic environment and the scientific perspectives and skills we wanted the students to be immersed in, faded, and we asked ourselves: How can we reconstruct the distance learning design to make certain that students grow in their academic and scientific abilities?

1 Among the aspects of teaching and learning that teachers have reported as challenges in the shift to exclusively online interaction are difficulties in motivating students, monitoring their progress, clarify problems with understanding, offering feedback and expressing general concerns and care (Warfvinge et al., 2022).

The Course as a Scientific Conference

To identify what was missing when the compact seminar went online, we considered what a conference is like for scholars. From a learning point of view, a conference could be considered a *zone of proximal development (ZPD),* according to the well-known theory of Leo Vygotskij (see e.g. Ekholm, 2012). What originally concerned children suits scholars as well: problem-solving with the help of better equipped peers, who do not simply have the answers ready but take part in an open learning process with critical questions. In the best of worlds, the very plurality of topics at a conference makes everyone an expert and a student in different settings, and the conference papers structure working life before and after. The hierarchies of a conference – full professors vs. assistant professors and PhD candidates – resembles the teaching situation and creates boundaries that sometimes can be torn down in the pub afterwards, when scholars become colleagues. In our experience, the compact seminar had played a similar role in the context of the course.

Making contacts, whether formal or informal, and whether one likes it or not, fuses one's own research interest with those of others, and socialises scholars into a scientific academic *community of practice* (Wenger, 1998).[2] The definition of "practice" put forward by Kemmis et al. (2014), which links activity with discourses and relations as constituent and interdependent parts of practices, is here relevant to our understanding of the scientific practice that we wanted the students to apprehend:

> A practice is a form of socially established cooperative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (relatings), and when this complex of sayings, doings and relatings 'hangs together' in a distinctive project (Kemmis et al. 2014, p 7).

2 A community of practice is characterised, according to Wenger, by mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

There are two specific aspects that were identified as particularly important in order to invite students into such a community of practice and create a conference 'zone' (*ZPD*) during the course, namely *socialisation* into a research environment and *uncoverage* of research skills in a peer milieu. Both of these pedagogical concepts were part of a more general attempt to move focus from content to skills, and to increase interaction not only between students, and between students and teachers, but also between students and their new field of scholarship.

Socialisation into the Practice of the Historical Study of Religion

Our aim was to invite students into an academic community of practice and thereby socialise them into the practice of the historical study of religion. With this aim in mind, we reorganised the first two weeks of the course to include more structured introductions to three distinct groups coming together on this course: the teachers, the students and the wider scholarly community, from the point of view of each person's specific expertise, research skills and research environments. First, the teachers introduced themselves carefully in an online seminar. More than simply introducing their own research interests, however interesting, the focus was on methodological and theoretical research skills, how they had been acquired, and in which environments. As an example, the acquisition of different 'dead' language skills, so important in historical studies, could be explored, because there are so many ways: at the desk, in another country and language learning environment, or through personal connections. Theories of power and gender, prominent in many research fields, might have been studied at home, or in a completely different cultural context. As a response, the students were asked to film a similar presentation of themselves, focusing on disciplinary background and skills that could prove important in this course, and upload it for everyone to see. In a concluding seminar a few days later, the centrality of disciplinary skills and the plurality of perspectives in approaching the formation of the three religions, was discussed. In this way, the students were asked to consider

themselves as part of the same research environment as their teachers, thereby creating a seminar milieu. The next step was meeting the broader scholarly community, as at a conference, with a similar set of questions.

This two-step introduction, with a focus on teachers and students, was followed by an investigation into the research environments of the study of the three religions in Sweden and beyond, aimed at illustrating communities of practice and raising awareness of the role of discourses and how disciplinary practices may relate to each other in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary settings. The third group, the 'scholarly community' was introduced in two ways. Firstly, colleagues at the department were interviewed, and these films were uploaded to highlight different research settings relevant to the course that they could find close at hand and perhaps be interested in. What was the story of the institution that the students studied at and how could scholars find a working place there? Which research projects, seminars and local academic journals could be relevant for students with similar interests? Secondly, students were asked to search for information about the course literature authors, all well-known scholars, from the point of view of their study background, research environments and publication outlets. In another seminar, these were presented and discussed along the lines mentioned before. Because some of the scholars had a religious background, a fourth group was also addressed, namely the practitioners of these religions in the present, in which students and teachers could also be part. In which ways do these living contexts affect the ways the past is interpreted and narrated? Is there a history without someone telling the story?

Towards the end of this initial socialisation where the students were invited into the academic field in all its diversity, as on the first bewildering day of a conference, they had become aware of their own perspectives and skills as well as those of their colleagues, teachers and course authors.

The Uncoverage Model

If the first pedagogical concept, *socialisation*, aimed at inviting students into the academic field with a focus also on their expertise, the second concept, *uncoverage*, served to provide tools for redirecting the focus from

'content' to research skills. Here, the so-called "Uncoverage Model" was helpful, a pedagogical method introduced by the historian Lendol Calder (2006) and developed by scholars at Lund University (Heidenblad, 2017; Pinto & Heidenblad, 2020; Weber, 2021; Markussen, 2021). Calder criticised traditional history teaching for a single-minded effort to 'cover' historical content (facts and knowledge), while at the same time 'covering up' the fact that history is not something historians know, but do, i.e., a skill and a scientific practice. In the end, history is an "argument without end" according to Calder (ibid: 1366).

In our experience, Calder's criticism also applies to student expectations, which can be shaped by a similar concern for the content of a specific topic, such as a 'religion'. Here, a pedagogical "bottleneck" (Pace, 2017) was identified, which was students' prior knowledge of *one* of the religions, due to previous studies and/or a living experience, and which made it all too easy for some to essentialise religious traditions instead of seeing them as historically constructed. In order to approach this bottleneck and provide a better understanding of the central role of discourses and narratives in research, the concept of "metanarratives" was introduced as a research tool.

How can we, then, understand the concept of metanarratives? As is well-known, the "post-modern condition" has been interpreted as "a condition whose defining feature was 'incredulity towards metanarratives'" (Gunn 2006, p 27, with reference to Jean-François Lyotard). For a long time now, scholars have pointed to the narrative structure of history, not least Hayden White (1979), and to the need of critically targeting 'master narratives' that prioritise colonial or simply male points of view. In a social constructivist mode, not only nations but also religions are "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991), a conclusion which has a direct bearing on the present course. While such ideas have become commonplace in the field of history, David Larsson Heidenblad has nevertheless argued that they have not yet affected pedagogical research in a corresponding way (2017; 2018). The pedagogical consequences of historical theory have not yet been adequately explored (2017, p 101–102; cf. Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg 2000, p 116), perhaps because Swedish historians have followed a German rather than an Anglo-Saxon tradition (Heidenblad 2018, p 134).

So how do students learn to identify both the metanarratives of ancient sources as well as those of contemporary scholars? Further, how did the idea of the course as a conference facilitate this learning? In the course *The Emergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, students were invited not only to deconstruct, but also to write their own metanarrative. From the outset, the course was structured according to concepts that can be explored as metanarratives, starting in general with the concepts of 'religion' and the historical period of study, 'late antiquity'. To help students think along these lines, one of the teachers was filmed reading a book which was not in his own field, i.e. not concerned with one's religion of expertise ("How to read a book from another discipline"). In the next step, the religions, 'Judaism', 'Christianity' and 'Islam', were treated as metanarratives constructed both in the past and present, and both by insiders and outsiders, including scholars. Group work was chosen as a way of facilitating students' encounters with, and deconstruction of, metanarratives of various kinds – as would happen at a scientific conference.

The group work assignments were guided in two directions. In the first, students were reading ancient foundation narratives (of a religion or a specific practice) *as* foundation narratives, trying to identify the tools of the trade, or 'genre', and then discussing them in seminars. In a similar manner, students read polemical interactions *as* polemics, from the point of view of genre, aim, recipient and a discussion of whether polemical writings perhaps could represent a shared culture of training, writing and production. The second direction concerned scholarly metanarratives in the past and present, and in written assignments students were asked to critically approach the ways in which the course literature thematised changes in perspective, and the 'story' they offered. Such assignments were commented on through both peer review and the teacher's comments.

In the end, both these directions were tried and tested in the exam, which consisted of a general question of comparison between the three religions, which the students should respond to both regarding ancient sources and modern scholarly interpretations, and during which they should critically and self-critically offer their 'own' metanarrative. In order to underline the conference mode of the course – and also not to overwhelm the students – an exam workshop (Markussen, 2021) started the exam

period, during which the students could discuss their attempts at telling the story in a consistent and critical way.

A Circle of Scholars – Students' and Teachers' Evaluations of the Course

Our aim for this development project was to replace some of the processes that happen more or less instantly, indirectly and sometimes simultaneously when students and teachers meet face to face in a scientific environment, with consciously planned activities and the aid of pedagogical tools. For us, it was important to invite the students to the course as young scholars to a conference, to a place where they considered their own skills and need for further training at the same time as they examined their teachers, their teaching environments and the course literature authors with a similar set of practical questions (how did they acquire their skills?). We made several major changes to the course at the same time, knowing that it entailed the risk of creating asymmetries and confusion. Some of these aspects were felt by the teachers. In hindsight, we opted for too many changes simultaneously and with the new focus on uncovering skills and practices, a bit of the knowledge and facts were lost from view – which created a tension between scheduling content and skills. The focus on metanarratives and foundation narratives, however, turned out to be an excellent way of turning a multidisciplinary course into an interdisciplinary one. It created a new base from which the teachers could work together more cohesively.

The pedagogical tools of socialisation and uncoverage proved efficient for creating a learning environment online with the benefits of the processes that take place at academic conferences. In light of such a conference, socialisation did not simply mean students encountering one another, but also their teachers and their research environments, including the international scholars writing the course literature. In light of such a conference, uncoverage did not simply mean the skills the students had, or needed to learn, but also the variety of skills scholars need, or lack, in order to discuss specific matters. Here, the focus on metanarratives proved especially valuable, because it put focus on the constructive and creative

nature of ancient sources as well as scholarly reconstructions of the past, including those of the students themselves. Naturally, some students needed more written responses than others to fully grasp the uncovering of metanarratives.

Students' reactions to the new layout of the course were surprisingly positive. Voices from the course evaluations spoke of personal growth and exaltation at being able to bring their own disciplinary skills into the course. As a group, more students finished the course than in the previous year and the student group was, like the teachers, more cohesive. In other words, we were more like the different scholars at a conference, in different capacities and with different skills, but with a common purpose.

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