THE ASSIGNMENT TRANSFORMED

Building a disciplinary affinity space in student blogs

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Abstract

School assignments traditionally represent a rigidly scripted social practice with limited opportunity space for student agency and engaged participation in disciplinary communities. The performance of school assignments very often involves the reproduction of knowledge rather than problem-solving and meaning production, and at the same time the reproduction of the established practice represented by the assignment. Research into digital literacy reflects an optimistic view of how technology in general, and blogs in particular, may help to change school practices on the basis of sharing and participation. This article is a case study of the use of blogs in a Norwegian high school, focusing on how a particular assignment set on four occasions during an academic year gradually changes conditions for student participation in the literacy practice of the subject concerned (Print and Photography) by transforming the assignment into an invitation to be part of an affinity space. Further, we analyze the students' responses to this invitation, first in an overall analysis of all the student blogs and then in an in-depth analysis of one of the blogs, demonstrating how, over time, the assignment space comes across as a chain of transformations entailing increasing student influence. This transformation process is analyzed using Theo van Leeuwen's concept of the recontextualization of social practices (van Leeuwen, 2008), supported by key categories from Systemic Functional Linguistics in the in-depth analysis of student texts.

Keywords: blogging, disciplinary literacy, recontextualization, transformation, social practices

1.   INTRODUCTION

Criticism of traditional schooling is probably as old as school itself. An explicit focus on school practice, however, is more recent. In the 1980's, several important studies addressed "the place called school" (cf. Goodlad, 1984), with a focus on the interplay between control mechanisms and knowledge in schools (McNeil, 2013),

and the issue of how traditional practices exercise their power over individual ambitions and events (cf. Sizer, 1984). Bernstein (1990) offered a model of schooling as a field for *reproducing* knowledge that is *produced* in a field outside school, meaning that working with knowledge in the school context implies changing the context and the purpose of the activity. New pedagogic frames are added that determine power distribution, roles, and activities as well as what is valued in the context. With Bernstein, we can say that the field of knowledge production is *re-contextualized* in school, and that traditional school practices imply a shift from exploration and knowledge production to reproduction of authorized knowledge in tightly scripted activities where the teacher represents authority and is supported by traditional practice.

Various fields of educational research share an ambition to find ways of changing school practices to enhance conditions for student participation. Increasingly, the ambition of changing school practices is tied to digital technology as a means for innovation or even radical reform of key components of school practices (Buckingham, 2003; Kress, 2004a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003 & 2008; The New London Group, 1996; Wegerif, 2013). There is a growing body of research into the educational use and functionality of digital tools. New technology provides tools and media for re-organizing pedagogic activities. Knowledge is less constrained and controlled in the digital world, and it can be accessed, organized, and re-organized in several ways (Hayes & Gee, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Students have access to powerful means of multimodal design, and the technology offers new possibilities for interaction, sharing, and collaboration (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Elf, Hanghøj, Skaar & Erixon, 2015; Kress, 2004b; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006;). Technology thus, at least in theory, opens opportunity spaces for negotiating the established power structure of learning practices. However, confronted with the stability and resistance to change of traditional practices, many educational researchers have turned their attention away from school (Hull & Nelson, 2009) toward outside-school learning contexts (Gee & Hayes, 2011) to explore how technology might provide frames for participation in meaningful learning processes. James Paul Gee has coined the term *affinity space* for the kind of learning communities to be found on interest-based websites, which he presents as a model for learning that seriously challenges current school practices (Gee, 2013; Gee & Hayes, 2011).

ICT in education is a large field of research, encompassing a variety of scopes and interests, theoretically and methodologically, internationally as well as in Scandiavia. Research on ICT in Norwegian school contexts covers all grade levels of education (Blikstad-Balas, 2013; Bølgan, 2012; Dons, 2006; Grüters, 2011; Juuhl, 2013; Knain, 2009; Lund et al., 2014; Nielsen et al., 2006; Olofsson et al., 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2012; Sandvik et al., 2012), and the research interests addressed range from understanding and defining digital literacy (Buckingham, 2006; Gillen, 2014; Ryberg & Georgsen, 2010) to teacher training, development, and professionalism (Lund & Hauge, 2011; Tømte, 2013), and the use of different portable devices (Elf, 2014; Sandvik et al., 2012). There are a few Norwegian examples of

research dealing with social and cultural aspects of the educational use of more recent web-based tools such as wikis (Knain, 2009; Lund, 2008; Rasmussen et al., 2012) and with blogs (Grüters, 2011; Juuhl, 2013; Kvåle & Rambø, 2015), but this is a research field which is still in its infancy. There is a lack of systematic research into what digital technologies mean to learners, across various disciplines (Elf, 2014; Haukås & Vold, 2012), and of in-depth case studies exploring the interplay between technological issues and participation in educational literacy practices. Moreover, there are few descriptions of classrooms where digital tools such as the blog are not simply used as a supplement to ordinary teaching. In fact, rather than allowing blogging to represent a new digital text culture with different affordances than traditional tools for literacy, blogs are often used as a side project, often limited in time, to traditional classroom practices (O'Donnell, 2006).

The present study is based on blog texts produced by last-year high-school students during one year of blogging as part of a Print and Photography class, along with observations and interview data from the same class (Nygard, 2013). Based on van Leeuwen's rethinking of Bernstein's concept of recontextualization, we will examine how writing on blogs may contribute to changing the conditions for participation in the literacy practice associated with written assignments. To do this, we will analyze a series of assignments pertaining to the Photography part of the class to find answers to the following questions: how is the assignment transformed throughout one academic year, and how do the students respond to this assignment?

2.   METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study is about the use of blogs in the final year of high school on a university-preparatory program in a high school on the west coast of Norway during the 2009–2010 academic year. The class consisted of a total of 14 students besides the teacher. Two of the student blogs were excluded from this study to simplify its linguistic aspects, as those students wrote in English, not in Norwegian like the rest of the class. Each student had his or her own blog. All texts, both the teacher's and the students' ones, were published openly on the web. The blog was used to respond to assignments, to publish and comment on the students' artwork, and to document exhibitions they visited.

We have limited our scope to the Photography part of the Print and Photography class as photography represents the primary focus of the work the students did. Within this part of the subject, we will concentrate on a series of four major assignments given during the school year, from September to May. These assignments are called "Five Categories" (see Table 1), and the students are asked to take photos over time with five specific categories in mind and then to choose their ten best photos to be published and commented upon on the blog.

Table 1: The categories for the photos that the students were instructed to take throughout all four installments of the Five Categories assignments during the academic year, indicating the month in which they were announced and the month of the deadline.

Assignment 1 Announced: August 2009 Deadline: September 2009	Assignment 2 Announced: October 2009 Deadline: December 2009	Assignment 3 Announced: December 2009 Deadline: February 2010	Assignment 4 Announced: February 2010 Deadline: May 2010
Fall	Light	Winter	Travel
Fruit, Berries, and Greenery	Black/White	Architecture	Spring
Animals	Weather	Portrait	Age
Reflections	Hands	Picture sequences	Sayings
Composition	Self-chosen theme	Stripes	Self-chosen theme

The four key assignments all have the same structure and organization: the same task is given four times, but with changes in the wording of the instructions. We explore the instructions and the changes in them in the first part of the analysis.

In the second part of our analysis, where we study how the students responded to the assignment, we have made further limitations to our scope. To provide a picture of the students as a group, we will focus on the last assignment, announced in February 2010 with a deadline in May 2010. In line with our analysis finding of a shift over the course of the year, we consider it more meaningful to study student texts from the end of the assumed transformation process than from its beginning. Further, to dig deeper into the student blogs, we will explore one of them more thoroughly before performing a close reading of a selection of that student's texts. The blog written by the student in question, "Alex" (all names are fictionalized), caught our attention from the start, and we have made several attempts to characterize the way he positions himself in the blogosphere. Our choice of Alex is information-oriented (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006) in the sense that Alex provides us with a rich and informative picture of what we see as important aspects of participation without being either an extreme case or a typical one.

The material consists of one year's worth of blog texts produced during the 2009–2010 academic year. At that time, the teacher involved was acknowledged as a pioneer by her colleagues, and we argue that her approach to organizing student writing in a public space such as the blog still deserves the attention of educational research—our case remains a rare example of what we consider to be successful use of student blogging in school.

In addition to the actual textual artifacts, the material consists of field notes and photographs from a period of three months spent observing the class (January through March 2010), transcriptions of group interviews in which all but two of the students in the class participated, and recordings of individual interviews with three of the students. In the interviews, the students discuss, among other things, the blogging activities as part of the class. Findings from the interviews are discussed in Nygard, 2013.

3. THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This article is rooted in sociocultural approaches to literacy and discourse in general. Some key concepts from this framework—(discursive) *practice, affinity space,* and *recontextualization*—need clarification as a basis for the analyses that follow.

Practice is a fundamental concept in sociocultural approaches to literacy (cf. Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Ivanic, 1998; 2009; Street, 1984) and discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986; Bloome et al., 2004; Gee, 2014; van Leeuwen, 2008). A practice consists of a set of key elements—participants, actions, setting, and artifacts—and can also be further broken down into aspects of these elements, as in van Leeuwen's approach to *Discourse and Practice* (2008). Any given social practice includes a number of elements: (1) a set of actions performed in a sequence; (2) participants in particular roles (e.g., instigator, agent, affected, or beneficiary); (3) performance modes, or "stage directions," relating to the actions that make up the practice; (4) eligibility conditions for the participants: how the participants "qualify" for a certain role; (5) presentation styles: requirements for how participants present themselves; (6) specific times at which (parts of) the social practice takes place; (7) locations for the social activity; (8) eligibility conditions for the locations: the conditions that the locations must fulfill; (9) resources, tools, and materials needed; and (10) eligibility conditions for the resources: the conditions that the resources must meet to be appropriate for the context. These elements are not necessarily all equally important or dominant when the social practice is represented in text (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 6–12).

Of particular importance in our analysis are the *eligibility conditions for participation*, as a way of identifying student agency in the process of transforming the assignment as practice. In a school assignment as a traditional practice, the eligibility conditions for students are tightly scripted (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Nystrand, 2006) in a hierarchical pattern. The students reproduce what the teacher already knows, with the purpose of saying or writing what the teacher wants to hear and, at best, of having their utterances assessed as adequate responses. The distribution of power underlying this practice is at the heart of sociocultural approaches to educational change at a time when literacy and learning also take place outside school to a large extent. James Paul Gee is one of several researchers who have turned toward *outside-school learning contexts* to find models for educational change. He has been searching for such models in the digital-literacy landscape,

and he suggests the term *affinity spaces* (Gee, 2005; Gee & Hayes, 2011) based on key features of a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998) to describe how technology provides new opportunities for learning. Gee & Hayes (2011) describes affinity spaces as an outside-school learning system making it possible for people to "[…] organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest or passion" (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 68). Different *groups* of people may engage in affinity spaces in different ways and for different reasons, such as a shared interest or endeavor, or a deep passion, to produce rather than consume. Further, leadership and mentoring in these spaces are flexible, in that some people may lead in some situations and others in other situations, and knowledge is distributed in the sense that different people possess knowledge about different things and are able to share it as and when necessary.

Gee's interest is mainly in outside-school contexts, such as gaming communities or other affinity groups outside school. In this article, we will touch upon the issue of how one such affinity-based outside-school practice—that of *being a photographer*—is acknowledged within the context of school. Our main interest, however, is in the school context, and more specifically in how student affinity can become a feature of the assignment as practice. We will bring Gee's concept of *affinity space* into the academic context to be better able to distinguish between substantively engaged participation on the one hand and procedural and instrumental engagement on the other; cf. Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991.

Discourses and practices, as described across different theoretical frameworks, have a double nature in that they simultaneously *form* action and are themselves continuously *formed* by action. The relative strength of these two aspects of a practice—those of being constitutive of and constituted by action—varies: some practices are loose and apt to change whereas other are rigid or "scripted" (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Nystrand, 2006) and very resistant to change. Based on how Bernstein views pedagogical discourse, it seems reasonable to consider it as a rigid practice rooted in tradition. In this article, we consider "the assignment" to be a prominent part of this traditional, tightly scripted practice, by which we mean a practice that is highly resistant to change, yet not impossible to change.

To better understand the kind of change that we are talking about, we draw upon van Leeuwen's rethinking of Bernstein's concept of *recontextualization.* Bernstein uses this concept to identify specific processes on a large scale, whereas van Leeuwen suggests using the term to describe micro-phenomena and more general processes, thus turning it into a more dynamic concept. Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned dual nature of practices, Bernstein's conception is important because it identifies features of "traditional practice," i.e. how practices form action, while van Leeuwen's conception reminds us that action continuously forms practices (and thus that practices can be changed through action).

In *Discourse and Practice* (2008), van Leeuwen emphasizes this distinction but also the link between "doing it" and "talking about it." Practices—some of which

are discursive—are bound to the moment of ongoing action. Whenever we talk and write about, or in other ways represent, practices, they are abstracted from the living present and *represented* in another context. In this process of recontextualization, the original practices are *transformed* in several ways, both socially and semiotically (cf. also Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 169). To describe the elements of the transformation process, van Leeuwen invokes the four rhetorical strategies for manipulation and variation of discourse: *substitutions*, *deletions*, *rearrangements*, and *additions* (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 17–21). Recontextualization as defined by van Leeuwen is about discursive representation of practice:

> "[r]econtextualization not only makes the recontextualized social practices explicit to a greater or lesser degree, [but] it also makes them pass through the filter of the practices in which they are inserted" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 12).

Based on van Leeuwen's rethinking of Bernstein's concept of *recontextualization*, we will explore how the blog may contribute to changing conditions for participation in the literacy practice associated with written assignments. We will analyze assignments pertaining to the Photography part of the class to show (1) how the assignment is transformed through repeated recontextualization in the blog universe, and (2) how the students respond to the transformed assignment. The first part of the analysis focuses on how the basis of teacher authority shifts from being rooted in the formalized hierarchy of school practices to being rooted in a shared interest and knowledge base concerning the subject matter. Here we will distinguish between authoritative discourse and dialogic (or internally persuasive; cf. Bakhtin, 1981) discourse. We will discuss this shift as a transformation of the assignment space to a space for affinity-based participation. This transformed space represents an opportunity and an invitation for students to take part in defining and developing what counts as significant. The second part of the analysis is twofold: an overall picture of the student texts and a more detailed analysis of the texts written by one of the students.

To describe how the students relate to the transformed assignment, we will make use of some key concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Knain, 2014; Maagerø, 2005). In SFL, the functions of language are often differentiated into three broad categories of language metafunctions which systematically correspond to the context in which language is used. The *ideational* metafunction (including what Halliday (2014) has come to call the *experiential* and *logical* metafunctions) is linked to the situational category of *field*. Field concerns aspects of the context significant to how content is construed, the subject matter, or questions of "what" in language (Halliday, 2014, p. 32ff; Knain, 2014, p. 20ff). The *interpersonal* metafunction links to aspects of the context that are significant to the construal of relationships between the participants in the discourse, labeled *tenor*—the "who" in language. Finally, the *textual* metafunction concerns aspects of the context that are significant to how texts are construed as functional units, labeled *mode*—the "how" in language.

The *field* structure is a structure *used* in the text, unlike for example *generic* structure, which is the structure *of* the text. Field structure is thus an artifact of analysis that can be used to bring out the representation of discourses or the knowledge of fields activated in specific social contexts (van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 203ff). Field as a central concept in SFL is the point of departure for van Leeuwen's appropriation of Bernstein's concept of recontextualization of discourses, as it rests on the assumption that texts refer to an experiential world outside themselves (van Leeuwen, 1993; 2008). On this basis, we find it useful to further explore the field structure of the texts in more detail by using analytical categories pertaining to field structure, which is mapped onto the ideational (experiential) aspects of the text. The first part of the analysis, then, explores field structure as recontextualizations of the assignment as a school practice, while the second part explores field structure in the students' texts in terms of how they use language to establish roles as professionals.

A central aspect of the ideational metafunction is the transitivity system. This system consists of a *process* (a verb or verb group) combined with *participants* (nouns or noun phrases) and *circumstances* (adverb phrases or prepositional phrases). The transitivity system describes how clauses with different types of processes contribute to construing experience in the text, and how the text's character depends on how process types are used and mixed (Halliday, 2014, p. 219). Besides studying the processes in the clauses across the various parts of Alex's texts, we will comment on other terms and categories relating to field and the ideational metafunction, such as theme/rheme, and we will also comment on lexical choices and pronouns. The analysis leads on to a discussion of how students might position themselves in the affinity space by activating outside-school practices within the assignment framework—in other words, how students may recontextualize outside-school practices within the assignment practice in school.

4.   ANALYSIS

The Five Categories assignment was accompanied by elaborate instructions the first time it was set but given more loosely as the academic year progressed. The first part of our analysis will study this development as a chain of recontextualizations (van Leeuwen, 2008), where "the assignment" as a traditional practice gradually transforms into a practice that affords the students an opportunity to take part in what we will call an affinity space based on shared knowledge and values. This is not a claim that there is a total transformation from an authoritarian practice to a fully democratic and interest-based community. Rather, given that the same assignment is repeatedly set, it is a matter of progressively increasing the distance to the power of the original practice to make room for other contexts. We will argue that the sequence of four similar tasks gradually widens the scope for student choice as to what practice they will be part of. Therefore, the main part of the analysis of the assignment will explore how the students respond to the possi-

bilities for participation afforded in the photo-blog assignment. We will study how the students recontextualize the assignment in their blogs, paying attention to whether, and if so how, they respond to the possibilities for participation in an affinity space that grows greater over the academic year. As a contextual background to a closer reading of one of the student blogs, we will first comment on all the blog posts relating to the fourth and final assignment.

4.1 The photo assignment—building affinity spaces

The photo assignment invites the students to take pictures inspired by five specified categories and to comment on their photos on their blogs. The students are asked to perform this task four times, twice each semester, and the teacher posts the instructions on her blog. To begin with, the teacher gives these instructions within the framework of "the assignment" as a stable practice which is established and consolidated as central and representative of school as an institution, a practice into which the students have been socialized over ten years of primary and lower-secondary school. The teacher posts the instructions for the first installment of the assignment on her blog on August 24—immediately after the start of the fall semester (Table 2):

Table 2: The assignment text for the first installment of the Five Categories assignment given in August 2009, early in the academic year.

Original text	Translated text
Fem kategorier	Five categories
1. Høst	(1) Fall
2. Frukt, bær og grønt	(2) Fruit, Berries, and Greenery
3. Dyr	(3) Animals
4. Reflekser	(4) Reflections
5. Komposisjon	(5) Composition
Disse fem kategoriene skal du jobbe med en stund fremover. Du leverer de ti beste fotoene på bloggen med kommentarer på slutten av perioden.	You will be spending some time working on these five categories. After this you will hand in your ten best photos, with comments, on your blog.
Neste tirsdag er punkt 2 læringsoppdrag. Ta minst 50 ulike foto innen temaet. Vi skal bruke det i en designoppgave senere.	The learning task for next Tuesday is Point 2. Take at least 50 different pictures within that theme. We will be using them for a design task later on.
Gudd løkk!	"Good luck"!

The text in Table 2 is brief and instructive, and it is not explicit about details. Its purpose seems to be to get the students started taking photos. The text refers to future school work (a "design task") in a tone that clearly signals the hierarchical distribution of insight and influence. The sparseness of detail can be read as an implicit reference to classroom talk about thematic categories in visual images, where it may also have been made clear that student "work" means acting as a photogra-

pher. However, the use of the pronoun "we" instead of "you" at the end is a way of inviting the students to draw upon the teacher's greater knowledge; this is the first explicit sign of a future shared affinity space. Finally, the jocular closing phrase, where the teacher plays with the English expression "good luck" by spelling it as a poor Norwegian speaker of English would pronounce it (hence the quotation marks in the translation), is a way of renouncing authority and of modeling an open and informal atmosphere. Creativity is valued, and it is OK to make mistakes in the company of others who share the same passion for the subject (cf. Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 65ff.). Moreover, and no less importantly, this closing phrase may be a sign of an attempt to recontextualize "the assignment" as a practice where the eligibility conditions for the students as participants are transformed.

The teacher's instructions for the assignment are organized as a dialogic sequence, providing clarifications and specifications as the work proceeds over the course of the entire academic year. It also makes implicit reference to classroom interaction. For both fall-semester assignments the teacher gives separate instructions for the taking of the photos and the writing of the blog post, but the spring-semester assignments are each announced only once, and in a far more implicit way. As the deadline for the students' blog posts on the first assignment approaches, the teacher posts further instructions to them (Table 3):

Table 3: The teacher's instructions pertaining to the first installment of the Five Categories assignment, published on her blog when the students' deadline was approaching (supplementing the earlier instructions shown in Table 2).

Original text	Translated text
September 21: Innlevering av 10 beste foto Når du leverer inn de ti beste fotoene dine skal du legge ved en tekst til hvert foto som besvarer følgende spørsmål: - Hva er ideen? - Hvilket fotoapparat har jeg brukt? - Hvordan er komposisjonen? - Hvordan er lyset? - Hvilken av de fem kategoriene hører fotoet til? - Hva har jeg lært? OBS! Du skal også levere det fotoet du synes er best på et eget innlegg. Det kan være et av de 10 eller et utenom. Fotoet skal ha en tekst med begrunnelser som de andre. Skriv også hvorfor du har valgt akkurat dette som din favoritt. Fotoet vil få en egen karakter. Deadline er tirsdag 29.september kl.15.00. PS. Andreas har illustrert dette innlegget.	September 21: Handing in your ten best photos. When you hand in your ten best photos, you should add a text to each photo, answering the following questions: - What's the idea? - What camera did I use? - What's the composition like? - What's the light like? - Which of the five categories does the photo belong to? - What did I learn? N.B. You should also hand in the photo that you think is best of all, in its own post. This may be one of the ten, or another one. That photo should have an accompanying text with reasons just like the others. In addition, you should explain why you chose this particular photo as your favorite. That photo will be graded separately. The deadline is Tuesday, September 29, at 3 p.m. P.S. Andreas illustrated this post.

As in the first instructions concerning the taking of the photos, we see here a pre-dominance of specific instructions. The teacher uses a very direct and authoritarian style. For example, the English translation contains three instances of "you should," corresponding to two instances of the corresponding Norwegian expression, which has a slightly more commanding ring to it, and one case of a verb in the imperative mode. The teacher provides a list of items that must be considered, and many students rely entirely on this list as a template for composition. The deadline is presented as a curt demand—as something which is for the teacher to decide and for the students to obey. However, there are also important features balancing this instructional authority. For example, the teacher illustrates her blog post with a photo taken by a named student, which indicates an opening for student participation. Further, the list of items itself is associative in nature rather than a logically ordered template for writing: presenting technicalities in between the idea of the photo and formal aspects of the visual image is probably not a good idea if the text is supposed to be argumentative and to provide a well-founded analytical comment on the photo. This apparent randomness of order may, in fact, be part of the reason why the students perceive that the threshold for writing in this class is low (Nygard, 2013). We will return to these aspects when discussing the students' responses to this assignment.

We have seen above that the first of the four installments of the assignment is presented in two blog posts, displayed in Tables 2 and 3. The second of the four installments of the assignment is presented, like the first one, in two blog posts. Here, the teacher gives her instructions in two parts, one concerning the actual photo assignment and the other concerning requirements for the blog text. In the photo part of the instructions, some of the text from the first assignment is repeated but there are also deletions and additions whose overall effect seems to be to play down the teacher's instructional authority and instead to foreground an expectation of student engagement and participation. For example, what the students are going to do in the photo part of the task is taken for granted. The teacher encourages them to "be inspired" by the categories, and she also declares that the deadline will be set through agreement. The instructions for the blogging part of the task first present the deadline that has been agreed upon. This is followed by the same instructions as for the first assignment. The teacher thus repeats these instructions, but she does so within a new and slightly changed context, where the students have already gone through the whole cycle of the task (photo shooting and blogging about the photos) once and where the teacher increasingly expects them to draw upon the shared knowledge of the affinity space.

For the third assignment (Table 4), which the teacher announces in late December 2009, instructions for the photo part and the blogging part of the assignment are both given in the same blog post. The sequence of actions is now implied, and the direct and instructional tone carries a content that refers more to tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1982), thus addressing the students as qualified participants in the practice:

Table 4: The teacher's assignment text for the third installment of the Five Categories assignment, given in December 2009 with a deadline in February 2010.

Original	Translation
- Vinter - Arkitektur - Portrett - Serie - Striper Disse temaene skal du jobbe med i framover. Husk at du kan kombinere temaene. Men sørg for å ha god spredning i fotoene du leverer inn på bloggen. Vi blir enige om deadline i neste termin.	- Winter - Architecture - Portrait - Picture sequences - Stripes These are the themes you'll be working on next. Remember that you can combine different themes. But make sure that there is a good spread in the photos you hand in on the blog. We'll agree on the deadline next semester.

The first sentence reflects the typical hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, as does the tone of the rest of the text. However, the message in the text as a whole is largely implicit—in part because of a presumption about shared knowledge, in part because of reference to classroom discussions on practical issues. All in all, rather than being a typical, explicit assignment text, it represents communication about ongoing work, between participants who, for the most part, know what to do. The teacher clearly positions herself as a master in this practice, and the students are expected to position themselves as apprentices in a process of learning and development. While at the beginning of the academic year, the students are addressed as novices needing more explicit information, later on they are addressed as more competent participants in the practice of taking photos and writing knowledge-based blog posts about them. This development is visible in the instructions accompanying the four identical tasks within the photo assignment.

Any concrete assignment represented in a sign system is a recontextualization of "the assignment" as a social practice. A tightly scripted practice such as "the assignment" often makes little room for changing eligibility conditions when the practice is recontextualized; we might say that the practice itself resists change in such recontextualizations. Nevertheless, the sequencing of the photo assignment as a concrete whole might be a way of making room for changes in "the assignment" as a social practice. The same assignment is further recontextualized within the framework of the concrete photo assignment through the four tasks, in a way that seems to make room for growth and learning.

The instructions for the fourth and last installment of the assignment, published in late February 2010, are quite brief (Table 5):

Table 5: The teacher's assignment text for the fourth and last installment of the Five Categories assignment. The teacher posted this assignment text in February 2010 and the students' deadline was in May, toward the very end of the academic year.

Original	Translation
Fem kategorier, del 4 Her er de nye temaene å jobbe med:	Five Categories, Part 4 Here are the new themes to work with:
• Reise	• Travel
• Vår	• Spring
• Alder	• Age
• Ordtak	• Sayings
• Selvvalgt tema	• Self-chosen theme
Vi blir enige sammen om innlevering av kategorier og beste foto etterhvert. Kos dere! PS. Lise har illustrert dette innlegget.	We'll agree together on the handing-in of categories and best photos later on. Have fun! P.S. Lise illustrated this post.

We notice here how the teacher has reduced the instructional content of her blog post to a minimum, based on an implicit trust that the students possess the knowledge they require to perform their work and do not need to have it stated explicitly. In the final assignment, the subject field referred to is the same as at the beginning of the academic year, but the pedagogical frame—and thus also the relationship between the students and the field of knowledge and practice—is assumed to be different.

The analysis so far shows how social practices in and outside school can be recontextualized in a way that makes room for student agency and participation in the literacy practice of a subject. Until now we have focused on how there is an increasingly strong presumption of shared knowledge and values underlying the task instructions, thus positioning the students as knowledgeable participants in the joint effort of writing about photography. In the following, we will look more closely at how the students in this class responded to the invitation to participate in an affinity space. A major point in the analysis of the assignment is that it develops over time. Because of the limited space available, we will focus on the last of the four assignments, in which the students respond to implicit instructions based on their socialization into the assignment practice over the course of the academic year. Developmental aspects of the students' writing are explored elsewhere (Nygard, 2016).

4.2 The students' blog texts: Five Categories, May

Read in isolation, the instructions for the different installments of the Five Categories assignment texts discussed above share some of the characteristics of the traditional school assignment—there is a set of requirements, such as particular categories to focus on and a list of topics to be covered in the descriptions of the pho-

tos. However, as we have seen, such a reading would ignore the chain of recontextualization of the Five Categories assignment in which the authoritative style is transformed from primarily expressing hierarchy to being used for trust-based effective communication within the practice of the class community. This is underscored by the fact that the assignment requirements and the "hand-in" date seem to be a matter for negotiation. Moreover, the instructions invite the students to approach the assignment from a variety of angles, creating potential links to several social practices related to photography, art and art criticism, essay writing, and journalism.

The students respond to this invitation in different ways. As required of them, all students have posted a minimum of ten pictures, with texts accompanying each picture. The texts are short—the total number of words in each blog post ranges from 578 to 1,410, with an average of 920. The blogging tools used all offer possibilities for commenting on other people's blog posts. Still, although the students highlighted the social aspects of blogging in the interviews with them, maintaining that they were inspired by each other's blogs (Nygard, 2013), there are in fact only four comments in total on the fourteen student blog posts relating to the February installment of the Five Categories assignment. Three of these comments are by other students and one is by a person who is not a member of the class.

All students seem to be using the teacher's assignment text as a guideline, but without necessarily answering every question in the assignment text. They all follow the themes listed in the assignment text, either taking new photos or—as indicated in some of the students' blog texts—using old ones that fit the thematic categories of Travel, Spring, Age, and Sayings plus a self-chosen theme. When it comes to answering the required questions from the teacher's blog, the class as a whole focuses the most on describing features of composition and light, as well as on attempting to write about the ideas behind the photos. The descriptions of composition and light activate a variety of subject-specific terms. The students' knowledge and use of such terms indicates that these are important topics given focus by the teacher.

The texts most often start with an explicit reference to the picture using demonstrative pronouns ('this is'/'this picture'/'in this picture'/'here we have a picture,' etc.). This frames the image itself as an important part of the text in that the students present it as the theme of both the first sentence and the first paragraph. This introduction is typically followed by a sequence describing the composition and light of the pictures, which—as we have seen—are two of the required items of information. These sequences are predominantly descriptive, often leaning on vocabulary drawn from various discourses related to art and art criticism in general and photography in particular. For instance, the students use terms related to composition (*center*, *periphery*, *juxtaposition*, *sharp/blurred*, *foreground/background*, *depth*, *contrast*, *golden ratio*, *subject*, etc.) and technical

terms from other fields, such as terms related to the software used for post-processing of the photos (*dodge tool*, *smudge*, *burn tool*, *crop*, etc.).

Another distinctive feature of the texts is the tendency to describe both the subjects of the pictures and compositional and thematic ambitions and choices in subjective, evaluative terms, normally without further qualification of the evaluations: 'The picture became more elegant […] exciting […] colors […] the rose got an exciting circle […] exciting contrast […] a beautiful spring.'

Overall, we see that the students draw on several possible social practices, not only across the different assignment texts but also even within individual comments. There is considerable variation in how the students approach the assignment, both in their choice of photographic genres and subjects for the pictures, in their interpretation of certain parts of the assignment text, such as how they describe their ideas, and in the effect that this exerts on how they present their photos in writing. Some express their ideas vividly, approaching poetic language, whereas others merely record what is in the picture. Some describe the technicalities of post-processing the image on a computer whereas others show less interest in that part of the discipline or profession.

In the following, we will narrow our scope to study only the text produced by one of the students, Alex, to see how he recontextualizes the photo assignment in his blog. An initial close reading of the texts produced by the class suggests that Alex is a student who finds an interesting way to navigate between the demands of "the assignment" as a familiar practice, on the one hand, and the invitation to become a proficient participant in the photo-blogging affinity space, on the other.

Figure 1: A screenshot of Alex's blog, showing a blog post in the context of the blog design.
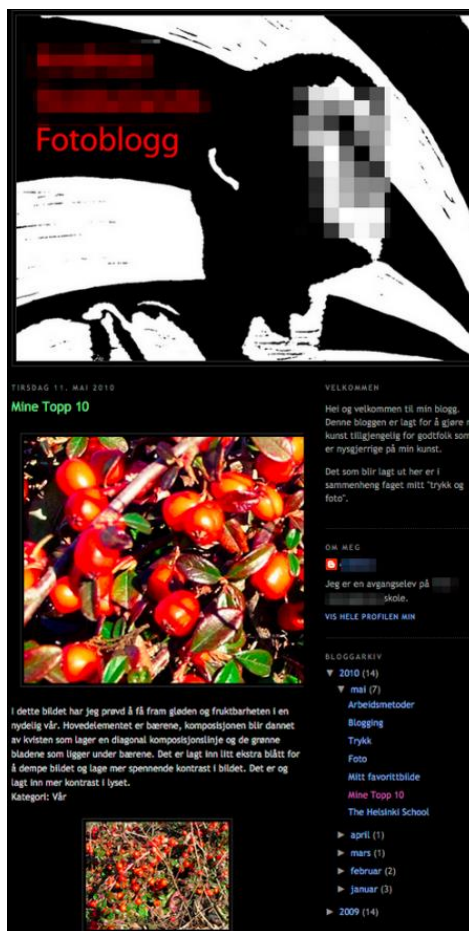

Alex uses various semiotic resources on his blog to reinforce an image of himself as an artist in the field of photography. For example, he has chosen the contraction "alexart" for the part of the URL of his blog that he has been able to decide for himself. The title displayed in the browser tab, also a deliberate choice, reads "My artwork," and the banner of the blog, shown at the top of the page, is custom made and includes a stylized picture of Alex and a text in large red letters reading "Alex Andersen's Photoblog." In the right sidebar of the blog layout, Alex has added a text box with a welcoming text formulated as a mission statement for the blog, declaring that this blog is intended to make his art available to people who might be interested. All these features of the blog have a paratextual function (Genette, 1997). They do not change as you read your way through the blog and thus permanently frame the various blog posts. Further, their thematic focus gives directions

on how to read the blog and on what to expect from it. By contrast, Alex makes sparing use of other elements such as links to other websites. Besides the presentation texts about himself in the right sidebar, there is a blog archive for sorting and retrieving his blog posts chronologically and a blogroll with links mainly to the other blogs of the students in the class; the only other links in the blogroll go to two Wikipedia articles related to the subject of Print and Photography. The simple layout and the small number of elements lend weight to the elements presented in the blog posts, which are often photos with short accompanying verbal texts (hereafter referred to only as "texts").

Alex's Five Categories texts in his response to the February installment of the assignment are the shortest of any student, totaling 578 words (an average of 52 words per image text). They consist of separate texts accompanying each of ten images plus one summative text with a general comment on the camera used and on learning outcomes. Given that this summative text does not comment on an individual photo but rather functions as a general, technical meta-comment on all of the photos presented, we will not discuss it further here.

Alex's texts tend to consist of four relatively distinct recurring sections belonging to different functional categories and serving different communicative purposes. We have labeled these sections *introduction* (presenting the image), *idea* (explicitly presenting the idea—although it could be argued that information about the idea is also conveyed by the next section, labeled *composition*; we make a distinction between them because the teacher does so in the assignment text), *composition* (describing the composition of the photo, most often in technical terms), and *circumstances* (an interpretative, often subjective section where Alex links his photo to places, memories, etc.). Figure 1 below shows the number of words per section across all his ten texts in his response to the February installment of the assignment (note that some texts lack some sections):

Figure 2: Number of words per section in all of Alex's ten texts for the February installment of the Five Categories assignment, published on Alex's blog in May 2010. The names of the texts ("Berries," "Lake," etc.) refer to the subjects of the pictures, not to the thematic categories set out in the assignment text (shown in Table 5).
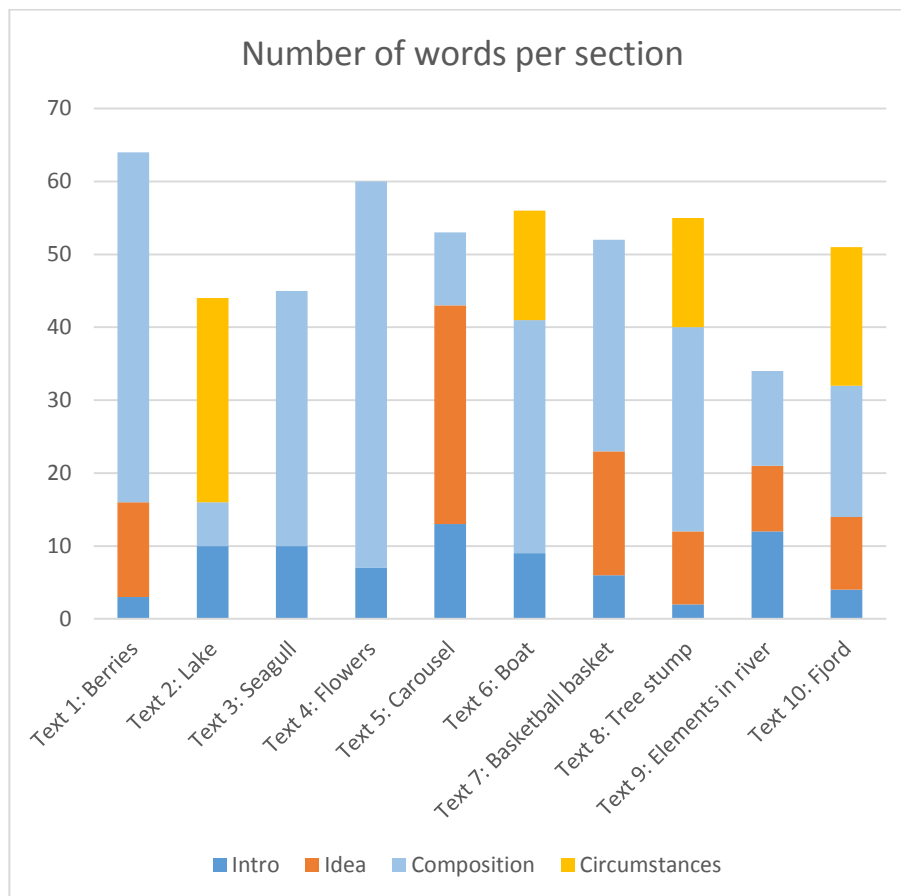
One easily spotted pattern in this figure is the salience of the section where Alex describes his composition; this section is also present in all ten texts. Judging purely from the number of words, this is an essential element of Alex's texts. In about half of the cases, Alex uses his text to comment on the idea behind a photo (6/10) and to make circumstantial links or inferences (5/10). (The categories of *idea* and *circumstances*, which are subjective, interpretative categories in Alex's texts, can be said to conflate in some texts, which makes it difficult to distinguish them so that they can be reliably counted.) In the following, we will elaborate on these categories and on Alex's linguistic choices.

As an example of his texts, we have chosen the first of his ten texts from the last installment of the Five Categories assignment, announced by the teacher in February (Table 5 above) and posted on the students' blogs in May. The text is quoted below (Table 6), with clause numbers added, along with an English translation (which may be rather literal at times to reflect the structure of the Norwegian original). The "+" sign marks the boundary between the theme and the rheme of the sentence, to be commented on below. In the following, we will use this text to illustrate general features of Alex's texts which are found throughout his blog post.

Table 6: One of Alex's ten pictures, with accompanying text, for the last installment of the Five Categories assignment. This assignment was set by the teacher in February 2010 and Alex posted his pictures and texts in May.

Photo	Original	Translation
	(1) I dette bildet + har jeg prøvd å få fram gløden og fruktbarheten i en nydelig vår. (2) Hovedelementet + er bærene, (3) komposisjonen + blir dannet av kvisten (4) som + lager en diagonal komposisjonslinje og (5) de grønne bladene som + ligger under bærene. (6) Det + er lagt inn litt ekstra blått for å dempe bildet og lage mer spennende kontrast i bildet. (7) Det + er og lagt inn mer kontrast i lyset.	In this image + I attempted to bring out the glow and fertility of a beautiful spring. (2) The main element + is the berries, (3) the composition + is created by the branch, (4) which + makes a diagonal compositional line and (5) the green leaves that + are lying underneath the berries. (6) There + was added some extra blue to soften the image and create a more exciting contrast in the image. (7) There + was also added more contrast in the light.

Alex's style of writing is brief and to the point. He strictly comments on features related to the images and does not include comments on factors surrounding the picture or the process of taking the picture unless they have a function in the description. This is reflected by his use of declarative main clauses, whose function is to provide information. While the information provided relates to the images, it often serves to explain Alex's compositional choices. Like most of his classmates, he devotes most of his commentary to his compositional choices. His brief, informa-

tive style is unlike that of some of the other students, who use a style representing a more or less deliberate attempt to distance themselves from the traditional academic written style; this is in fact a feature of their blog writing that those students comment on in the interviews (Nygard, 2013).

The themes of the clauses describing compositional choices are predominantly ideational, maintaining the thematic orientation and giving prominence to Alex's photos and their content. This is also reflected in the process types found in the same clauses, which are predominantly material and creative, with the function of expressing physical action ("is created by"; "makes"; "[color] was added"). Here, Alex steps back from the text and assigns the role of actor to one of the compositional elements of the image: "The composition is created by the branch, which makes a diagonal composition line, and the green leaves that are lying underneath the berries." Still, in some of his other texts he also uses both "we" and "I" as actors in a few descriptions, and in two sentences he uses a construction with a formal (empty) subject *det* (English "there") as a presentational construction, with unidentified actors realizing the process.

In line with the theme/rheme structure and process types described above, the content words in his texts relate strictly to the photo and the elements in the photo, with some exceptions. These exceptions occur when Alex uses references to other geographical places or cultures to qualify his interpretations, or when he otherwise supplies interpretations of his own images by linking them to circumstances outside the composition: "The image […] is reminiscent of typical images of [the district of] Jæren"; "I see an expression of urban culture in [the subject]." Such interpretative sequences, despite their relative rareness, are characteristic of Alex's texts. In these sequences, he deviates from the factual style strictly referring to entities in his composition by establishing connections to phenomena outside the image itself using interpretative categories of language. This can be exemplified by another of his ten texts from the same assignment, which concerns a photo showing a carousel (Table 7):

Table 7: One of Alex's ten pictures, with accompanying text, for the last installment of the Five Categories assignment. This is another picture with accompanying text from the same blog post as the one shown in Table 6.

Photo	Original	Translation
	(1) Dette er ett bilde av en karusell på barneskolen jeg vokste opp på. (2) Det er for meg ett litt nostalgisk bilde. (3) Det ble satt opp når jeg gikk på skolen. (4) Ideen bak bildet var å få frem ett uttrykk av forgjengelighet og ensomhet. (5) Spenning i lyset finner vi i metallet som reflekterer solskinnet.	(1) This is a picture of a carousel at the primary school where I grew up. (2) It is to me a somewhat nostalgic picture. (3) It was put up when I was a student at the school. (4) The idea behind the picture was to bring out an expression of transitoriness and loneliness. (5) Tension in the light we find in the metal reflecting the sunshine.

Here, the first and fifth clauses are examples of an introduction, referring to the photo, and a description of compositional choices, both typical features of Alex's texts. In the second, third, and fourth clauses, by contrast, Alex relates the image to a sense of nostalgia tied to revisiting childhood places, to remembering the carousel as new from his schoolboy point of view and contrasting this memory with the image of worn paint and a carousel well used for many years after he himself left the school. He explicitly connects thematic categories such as transitoriness and loneliness with aesthetic expressions, without sentimentality and with a natural authority, mature and self-confident in his judgments. In other corresponding passages describing other images, Alex makes similar interpretative connections, for example: "[This image] is meant to give an impression of transitoriness, but I also see an expression of urban culture in it." As in the carousel text, he sometimes brings a story to his interpretations, such as describing an image of a tree stump floating in the water as someone who has "been through a lot, and has now ended up in placid waters." It is in these circumstantial, subjective–interpretative sequences—sometimes conflating with the sequences where he describes the idea—that Alex most frequently uses the personal pronouns "I" and "me," relating these

passages to himself in a different and more explicit and direct manner. While material process types expressing creation dominate the sequences describing the composition of the photos, these interpretative sequences are dominated by process types expressing sensory actions and establishing relationships between or classifying entities in the text, as well as mental and relational processes: "It is to me a nostalgic picture" (relational, classifying the image); "I see [i.e. perceive or interpret] an expression of urban culture [in the image]" (mental).

Process words of *doing* are most likely to be found in Alex's descriptions of his compositional choices, which is where descriptive names of qualities, most often disciplinary terms related to art and photography, are also most commonly used. Evaluative words sometimes occur there, but they are more likely to be found in the circumstantial, interpretative sequences mentioned above as well as in the introduction, reflecting how these sequences are places where Alex takes a subjective, interpretative position in his texts. It is also in the interpretative sequences that we find most examples of abstract nouns and nominalizations such as *transitoriness*, *loneliness*, *glow*, and *fertility* (terms that we have commented on above). Although these are relatively conventional grammatical metaphors, they serve a function in Alex's text as pregnant terms loaded with connotations, which makes them stand out from the rest of his text.

To illustrate his lexical choices, let us have a look at the following list of content words from the two example texts above (Tables 6 and 7):

- Names of entities:
  things, concrete: berries, [the color] blue, branch, carousel, leaves, light, metal, picture, primary school, sunshine
  things, abstract: composition, compositional line, contrast, fertility, glow, loneliness, spring, tension, transitoriness
- Names of processes:
  doing & happening: added, attempted, bring out, created, grew, lying, make, put up
  being & having: is, was
- Names of qualities:
  evaluative: beautiful, exciting, nostalgic
  descriptive: diagonal, extra, green

To sum up, Alex uses his blog to present his artistic photos, making photos a salient element in the blog design through the paratextual elements of the blog as well as the contents of his visually dominated blog posts. He writes in a concise, thematically oriented style, devoting most of his blog texts to commenting on compositional choices in his images, thus underscoring his ambitions as a photographer using the blog to present his art to a group of interested readers. However, an interesting feature of his texts is how he takes hold of his ideas in some passages of the text, writing maturely and personally about his images with a natural authority and creating interpretative links between his own photos, cultural phenomena, and broad thematic categories.

With this in mind, we will now turn to the issue of recontextualization, commenting on social practices that Alex draws upon in his texts as well as the semiotic perspective of recontextualizing the school assignment to a blog text.

4.3 Recontextualization: from assignment to blog-based affinity space

We start from the assumption that all texts are representations of social practices—of real-world activities—however abstract or removed they may be from the social practices they represent (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5). Discourses that have their origins outside a given context, such as school, can be realized in an apt manner within that new context (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 169). Moreover, meaning material can move across media, with the move possibly entailing epistemological change (ibid.). In the following, we will build on the analysis of Alex's blog texts presented above and discuss his blog texts against the backdrop of the two dimensions of recontextualization: (a) recontextualization of social practices from outside school to school; and (b) recontextualization of the modes of assignment writing from the traditional way to the blog.

When responding to the Five Categories assignment, Alex is part of the framework of the assignment given to him as a student in a school as part of the curriculum and for the purpose of assessment. At the same time, the assignment, as it has grown in interaction between the teacher's authority and negotiations, discussions, and adaptations to the circumstances in the classroom, invites creative adaptation. This is an opportunity that Alex seizes. In this way, Alex both partakes in the assignment and recontextualizes it to fit his own blog's aims and ambitions.

In this assignment, Alex invokes the social practice of a photographer, specifically the practice of taking artistic pictures which he intends to present to interested viewers. In general, the design of his blog downplays its role as part of the school curriculum, instead highlighting its function as a platform for an artist to communicate his art. These design features are a response to the teacher's open invitation to take ownership of the idea in this particular assignment. In fact, Alex responds to this invitation in several ways:

(a) Visually: In this assignment practice, the teacher gives the students responsibility for finding suitable subjects and working with the photos, both on location and in terms of using software to emphasize and enhance compositional features such as contrast, light, color, and focus. An important part of Alex's recontextualization of the artistic photography practice in this assignment is his visual approach: the subjects he chooses, and what he seeks to bring out in them both when taking the pictures and when post-processing them on the computer. Throughout this assignment, Alex takes on the identity of—or recontextualizes the social practice of—an artist who uses concrete subjects, predominantly from nature, and who is particularly and explicitly interested in bringing out aesthetic characteristics in his subjects, including contrasts, directions, or lines in the composition that he finds in nature, and a sense of motion

that the compositional elements convey. He uses his textual comments to give arguments in favor of this approach.

(b) Linguistically: The images, his own artwork, is what informs and motivates Alex's written texts. Based on the analysis of linguistic features presented above, it can be concluded that what he focuses on thematically in his comments on his photos are mainly two things. First, his texts draw on a photographic disciplinary discourse, focusing chiefly on describing compositional elements in the pictures, and use a thematically oriented, strict style of writing with subject-specific terms. Second, in some of the texts he goes beyond the concrete references to elements in his photos, namely in sequences where he links the subject of a photo to subjective, personal experience, invoking large interpretative categories. In other words, his written texts draw both on academic discourses leaning toward art criticism, used to describe his art, and on a poetic discourse with expressive language, used to add depth to his descriptions.

(c) Medially: The factors mentioned above—Alex's response to the teacher's invitation to assume authority, his aim to bring his perspectives on photography to an audience, and his reflections on his own artwork—are all associated with the choice of the blog as the platform for assignment writing. The traditional school assignment is recontextualized in a new, digital medium, and this entails certain changes. The shift to blogging involves moving the text both across media and across social practices, to new literacy practices that have emerged with the generation having grown up with digital media. This issue is touched upon in interviews with the students, where they stress the blog as a different textual culture and discuss how they participate on their blogs based on a different concept of literacy than the one they use in other, typically academic, disciplines (Nygard, 2013). They characterize their blog texts as shorter and more personal, because they can write what they think, and they specifically contrast these texts with those produced in the subject of (L1) Norwegian. They also highlight writing for an audience as a source of motivation (ibid.). This can be interpreted as a claim that blogs belong to a culture which is different from the school culture, that the blog is a native digital genre that emerged hand in hand with the world-wide web around the turn of the millennium (Blood, 2000; O'Reilly, 2005; Rettberg, 2013). Blog writing, in particular the photoblog genre, is thus one—and an important one—of the recontextualized practices that we find in the students' texts.

It is perhaps here, in the social practice of the blog, that Alex finds a justification for his self-confident, authoritative voice: it may come more naturally in a blog than in a traditional hand-in to address an audience which does not consist solely of the teacher, perhaps especially when the genre and writing environments are ones where the school does not hold all the cards. In this way, there are links between (a) the assignment recontextualized as an affinity space, (b) the blog as a platform

and genre inviting other types of communication than are commonly found in academia, and (c) the semiotic choices that Alex makes in his blog.

As mentioned earlier, recontextualizations can occur in chains, where social practices are embedded in new social practices. This may involve transformations, such as the substitution or deletion of elements of the social practice (with semiotic elements), the rearrangement of elements of the social practice, and the addition of elements to the recontextualized social practice. Crossing the boundaries between social practices is difficult, for several reasons. One of the reasons may be found in the eligibility conditions for participation in the social practice, and hence it is interesting to see how those conditions are transformed in this assignment compared with traditional assignment practices. As we have discussed above, the students are given a large degree of freedom in the Five Categories assignment, both because of the evolution of the instructions and approaches to the assignment in the affinity space that is established in the classroom and as a result of the teacher's encouragement of the students to find suitable subjects, to plan and take photos, to enhance the images using software, and to describe the pictures. To this should be added that the descriptions are written on the students' individual, and publicly accessible, blogs. These conditions mean that a great deal of responsibility and ownership is handed over to the students, thus reducing teacher authority, entailing a recontextualization of the eligibility conditions for student participation in a central practice in school.

5.   IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Assignments are an important part of the traditional literacy practices in school, and the assignment practice is a rigidly regulated one which has the power to absorb other practices and subsume them into its hierarchical organization with respect to participation, setting in time and space, and access to different resources involved. In other words, the assignment practice tends to absorb other practices and to resist being part of other practices. When students write assignments, it is very difficult for them to take possession of the text since the rules of the practice deny them the right to go beyond the situation of being a student writing for the teacher/evaluator.

Our case is an example of how a teacher has transformed the tight framework of the assignment into a space of possibilities for students to take on agency and to situate themselves at the authorial center of their own texts. Many factors contribute to the creation of this space of possibilities, but the overarching one, in our view, is the establishment of an affinity space over the course of the academic year. Instead of having the students write assignments in an elaborate code to model the explicitness of academic language, the teacher lets the task develop as the students' work progresses. After a while, the teacher clearly expects her students to have the purpose of the assignment in mind without telling them explicitly to do so.

The task itself also makes an important contribution to the transformation of the assignment as practice. This is because it calls upon the students to make independent judgments, to make connections between abstract categories and the world as seen through the camera lens, and to verbalize these connections in writing. Thus, the students are given the opportunity to interpret visual representations in writing. At the same time, they are guided into their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986) because of the massive experiential support that they can draw upon when it is their own work that they are writing about.

We have seen that these aspects of the transformed assignment make room for practices from outside school—both professional and leisure-time practices, all of them connected to the arts as well as to critical and academic writing. The blog in itself also represents a practice where all of these niches of literacy practices can be recontextualized. We have suggested that the recontextualization of the blog into the assignment as practice has the power to resist the forces trying to subsume it into the established assignment practice. For this reason, the blog offers an alternative infrastructure for recontextualization: a way out of the school context, quite literally, or a mediator between practices inside and outside school, in the sense that the students write for potential readers interested in photography.

Any practice is determined by its participants. In our case, an important factor is how the students respond to the opportunities for participation offered to them. We should keep in mind that the students have thirteen years of experience with "the assignment" as a school practice and with the eligibility conditions inherent in this practice. Hence it is not self-evident that the students should either see or trust an invitation to join a transformed practice, and this is also confirmed to some extent in our analysis of the students' blog texts. The students often follow their instructions for writing quite mechanically, in a way that might indicate that they are simply "doing what they have been told to do" rather than writing in their own voice about their creative ideas and products. In other words, they write from a position with familiar eligibility conditions provided to them by the traditional version of "the assignment" as practice.

Even so, there are important signs that the students also accept the invitation to be part of the community of the Print and Photography class. Their blog texts are largely written in ways that make them different from texts produced within the framework of traditional, academic literacy practices, in some cases with looser grammatical and orthographical requirements than what is normally expected in academic work at this grade level. The students comment on these features in interviews, explicitly contrasting their writing style on their blogs with that of the discipline of (L1) Norwegian. They describe their assignment texts in Norwegian as "forced" and rigid, hampering their creativity (Nygard, 2013). The blogs, by contrast, are characterized as arenas where it is easier for the students to write creatively and express their thoughts, where they can "let [their] fingers fly" (ibid., p. 99). The blog offers another approach to communication, where the threshold for writing is considerably lower than in academic-essay writing. The students have

something to write about, and the blog allows them to spell it out. Even the teacher's disorganized list of elements and the students' mechanical use of it might fit into this perspective, as part of the low threshold for writing about their own work. This is a matter of eligibility—the students are part of a community sharing information and interests, rather than writing for the teacher in order for her to assess their work. In this way, the blogs seem to function as a mediator between in-school social practices and outside-school practices and discourses that the students can identify with, such as discourses and social practices related to art in general, art criticism and history, and various kinds of photography and photo-technical discourses such as amateur photo-blogging—practices that we have observed as recontextualized in various blog posts.

The basis for a more detailed account of how these various outside-school social practices are recontextualized within the framework of the Five Categories assignment was obtained through closer study of the texts by one of the students, "Alex." In Alex's final set of Five Categories blog texts, we find several recontextualized outside-school social practices. First, Alex draws upon practices related to artistic photography, in a compact manner and within the boundaries of the school assignment, establishing himself as a photo artist. He exemplifies how the students accept the assignment text's invitation to describe ideas. Alex uses this as an opportunity to present an interpretation of his own images, and he places the focus on his own images as artwork and on himself as the artist, using interpretative categories in his descriptions of his pictures and referring to emotionally charged personal experiences, memories, and feelings to convey the ideas behind the images. This way of responding to the assignment text is a recontextualization in itself, namely of the assignment text as an invitation to stand out as a profound artist who conveys and comments on his own art.

6. CONCLUSION

It has been, and still is, a major ambition in educational research to transform the aspects of school practices referred to above so that they will make much more room for substantive engagement, depth of learning, participation in subject-specific literacy practices, and dialogic interaction, as well as agency, design, and the solving of real problems in modern technological contexts. All of this can be said to represent a search for a way of "opening dialogue" (Nystrand, 1997) within the strict and "scripted" (cf. Gutierrez et al., 1995) regime of school practices, most prominently represented by "the assignment."

Recontextualizing the practice of school-assignment writing into a new medium such as the blog, with its particular communicative and semiotic affordances, is a way of transforming the highly change-resistant assignment practice into something resembling an affinity space. Such a transformation involves opening up the tight script governing assignment writing, connecting the students' writing with the social practices that are recontextualized in their texts, and by doing so providing

students with a broader register of writer identities to enact. The use of blogs miti-gates the effect of restricting assignment writing to the school context alone. In other words, the blog helps to create a link between school work and meaningful practices outside school, and as such it represents a potentially productive way to increase participation in subject-specific literacy practices in school.

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