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# How to claim knowledge: The use of information in the lifeworld of the educational context

**Janne Backlund**

Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Janne.Backlund@abm.uu.se

***Abstract:** Using a small body of empirical data concerning the types of information students handle, this paper inquires into the problematic of knowledge creation, artifacts of knowledge, and the possible role of examination as a negative factor in students' reflective achievements. Habermas' theory of communicative action is proposed as the theoretical framework for analyzing the educational environment seen as a lifeworld. From the observed fact that types of information students themselves produce (papers, essays, lecture notes, master theses, etc.) are hardly mentioned as information they say they handle, the tentative conclusion is drawn that these missing types are systematically excluded. The theoretical framework provides an explanation for this state of affairs. The overall goal of higher education is to increase knowledge in a particular field. In teaching, however, this goal is dealt with in a training manner, clearly manifest in the examination process. Therefore, the action orientations of the students will differ more or less from the overall goal. Claims of validity connected with knowledge turn in a normative direction in action situations oriented towards examination. Since information is the link anchoring claims of validity, students become inclined to exclude the artifacts of their own knowledge creation. The latter are not viewed as dealing with information linking the claims connected with the overall goal of increasing 'real' knowledge, instead being taken as constituting the links for normative claims. The paper also proposes certain means in line with the theory for improving this state of affairs.*

***Keywords:** Communicative action, concept of information, reflection*

## **Introduction**

The educational problem space for this paper may be formulated as the conflict between the demand to pursue the content of a curriculum, and assignments in connection with it, as realistically as possible and the need to diminish student tasks in order to create an environment where the participants can safely develop different abilities before they begin their professional lives. This necessary 'diminishing' of the students' activities may have an impact on how they reflect upon the knowledge created, preventing them to some degree from considering the general importance of their own products, such as papers, essays, web applications, etc. The reason for this is that reflective accomplishments tend towards examination issues rather than toward the content of the knowledge created. This paper aims to show how such tendencies can be made visible through an inquiry into how students

conceive of the knowledge-related concept of information and the different types of information they say they handle in their role as students. The aim is also to utilise the explanatory power of the *theory of communicative action* to identify reasons for this state of affairs and suggest possible solutions.

The small set of empirical data used in this article was collected through tape recordings and note-taking among the students in the LIS masters programme during the 2001/2002 academic year in connection with an international portfolio project called “Foliothinking”. The purpose of this project – a collaboration between Uppsala University, The Royal Swedish Institute of Technology, and Stanford University – was to develop methods and tools around the portfolio metaphor in order to enhance students’ reflective and meta cognitive abilities (The Foliothinking Project 2002).

## **Communicative action**

In *The theory of communicative action*, Jürgen Habermas (1981) formulates a social theory on formal pragmatic grounds. Using the philosophy of language as his foundation, he develops a dualistic perspective whereby society is simultaneously conceived of as a lifeworld and a system, in which the former structurally determines the latter. He elaborates the concept of *communicative action* as a norm for the way the lifeworld is structured through actors reaching out to understand and coordinate their actions through communicative accomplishments. Habermas argues convincingly that this type of coordination of action orientation is rational.

Communicative action goes on in the lifeworld of the actors, the space where everything takes place in our lives as social, human beings. The lifeworld is structured around the three-world concept (Habermas, 1981, Vol.1, p. 100): the objective world (“the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible”), the social world (“the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations”), and the subjective world (“the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access”). Some type of common ground is necessary to make it possible to reach out communicatively (in language) and be understood by others. Habermas distinguishes two means for this: *cultural tradition* and *worldviews*. It is important to stress that it is the coordinated action oriented to one of the three worlds that constitutes communicative action, not the sole act of communication itself. In order to coordinate action in this way, subjects have to reach out for understanding, and this core of communicative action is established through speech acts. Every speech act has validity claims attached, concerning which the hearer, tacitly or expressively, must take a *yes* or *no* stand. Communicative actions are split into two parts, the first serving to establish an understanding that may lead to a coordinated act in the second. The claims to validity connected with every speech act must be anchored in the three worlds simultaneously. Hence, an utterance must be in order with the objective world around us, in accordance with the actual normative system, sincerely meant, and, in addition, symbolically expressed in a comprehensive way. Otherwise, we are not dealing with communicative action.

Depending on the theme of the action situation, one of the claims is in the foreground. If the theme concerns, for example, the existence of something in the objective world, the claim to truth will be in the foreground, but the (contextual) rightness of the utterance and the speaker’s sincerity will still be in play. For the most part, since all actions in the lifeworld take place within the commonality of a shared worldview and culture, we do not need to refer to our claims explicitly because large parts of this intersubjectively shared knowledge are transparent in everyday practice. It is in connection with what Habermas terms *problematic*

*expressions*, i.e., utterances whose validity claims have become questioned, that there may be a need to explicitly anchor different claims, for example through reference.

Communicative action is normative in the sense that we cannot avoid it in the course of social evolution. In modern society, large parts of the lifeworld, cultural traditions, and worldviews are reproduced through this type of action. While actors do pursue acts steered by other means, this type of action by itself cannot explain a complex society or the dynamics of social evolution. Building on the idea that human interaction is mainly communicative action, Habermas manages to build a theory for the entire social structure that allows for systemic generalizations as well as free active agents.

In order to make use of Habermas' very abstract theory, it is necessary to recontextualise it (Blaug, 1997). Empirical generalisations within the context of an actual lifeworld must, however, be made with caution with respect to the theory. My position is that it is justifiable to generalise on different levels both claims of validity and action orientations in order to make possible an operationalisation of the theory. In this respect, the educational context may be said to comprise action orientations (goals) at different levels as well as validity claims (argumentatives) in more or less complex forms. Consequently, the educational context may be characterised as a lifeworld where different participants with a communicatively negotiated goal try to coordinate their efforts on different levels to reach that goal. The overall goal may be said to be the increase of knowledge in a specific knowledge domain, which requires action in both research and teaching. At a somewhat lower level, actions taken to realise this goal take the form of teaching and learning in specific courses, with a yet more basic level comprising concrete discussion of a specific theme or intellectual efforts to come to grips with a particular textbook or article. On all levels actors confront each other as they endeavour to attain the overall goal of increasing knowledge. By doing so, they put forward various validity claims in order to persuade their opponents to adopt their action orientation of choice. The researcher puts forward her/his claims in seminars, papers, and articles, while the teacher reveals her/his arguments in lectures, classes, and textbooks. In addition, administrative bodies take part in the quest to realise the overall goal. All this is normatively achieved through communicative action, which is not the same as saying that every act is coordinated communicatively; there are always activities taking place that are steered by other means. By saying that this is achieved *normatively* as communicative action, I propose that everyone taking part is fully aware that this is how things *should* be, and that every actor is *inclined* to act communicatively.

## **Knowledge and the concept of information**

I understand knowledge as something that must be created and renewed through interaction with physical objects, a communicative act with other actors or artifacts representing knowledge, or reflective accomplishments in one's own mind. The latter may also be characterised as a communication process where ego enters into dialogue through the act of taking on the role of a generalised alter towards her/himself. This should be understood as an *action oriented* concept of knowledge. Sarvimäki (1988, p. 58) states that "[t]here is a continuous interaction between knowledge and action so that knowledge is created in and through action and so that experiences that the actor acquires through action influence subsequent action". She also proposes that "[k]nowledge can be articulated in everyday language, science and art" (pp. 58-59), where "articulations" distinguish knowledge from the artifacts themselves, which may represent knowledge (i.e., linguistic expressions, images, art objects, etc.). I propose that information is used to claim different kinds of knowledge.

The concept of information has been treated in many ways since Shannon and Weaver's classical mathematical approach in the 1940s. Information scientists have developed the initially very mechanistic and computer-oriented concept such that it permits both individuals and collectives to be important parameters within the information system. Different approaches have defined information over the whole range from something tangible or physical to a pure process (Case 2002).

Ingwersen (1996) represents one of the process-oriented information scientists, stressing the importance of defining information so that it incorporates both sender and receiver. Furthermore, the concept must be somehow related to knowledge. Simply stated, Ingwersen sees information as the process that occurs when a knowledge structure transfers some of its content to another knowledge structure. Such a structure can transfer information when it reaches a certain state, such as when a scholar is able at a specific moment to write a paper, give a lecture, etc., or it might also develop a need for information. Ingwersen terms the latter a state of uncertainty. This apparently happens all the time, for example in research when a scholar tries to find answers that cannot be provided by internal resources of the subjective knowledge structure.

This concept of information initially appears to have several advantages. Probably the most obvious is that it moves away from a view of information as something tangible or physical that must be properly classified and stored, thereby opening itself up to the inclusion of interacting individuals and collectives. Ingwersen views items stored in an information system (books in a library) as merely potential information for some arbitrary user. Taking actors or collectives (and computers) involved in information exchange as separate knowledge structures must, however, be rejected as this is not compatible with the action-oriented concept of knowledge used here. Also rejected is the notion that information is of the same type as knowledge. Indeed Ingwersen's conception of information, where different parts of an information system behave in predictable and measurable ways, remains largely mechanistic, despite efforts to include individual actors and collectives. But I will preserve the notion that information is a process in which participants can act as both receivers and senders, i.e., as something other than stored artifacts (these may be understood as mere potentials).

Limberg (1998 and 1999) considers the question of the nature of information as secondary to the way it is used. She utilises phenomenographic methods to examine the use of information in an educational context and shows that the demand for, and evaluation of, certain retrieved information is determined by the conceptual understanding of the topic rather than its subject domain. If the topic is viewed as giving factual answers to specific questions, the findings will be evaluated differently than if it is understood as an interpretation of what is good or bad with a specific issue. Limberg's findings fit well with my proposed view concerning information and the connection to Habermas' theory.

The link to the theory of communicative action must obviously be sought at a low level, namely, speech acts. I have discussed elsewhere the concept of information in connection with the validity claims accompanying every speech act. While these claims, which the participants raise as they seek to understand and coordinate actions, do not themselves constitute information *per se*, they certainly involve the use of information (Albrechtsen and Hjørland 1995 indicate the connection between *knowledge claims* and information). I propose that *information* constitutes the links to each of the three worlds (objective, social, and subjective), depending on the character of the claim made. At an abstract level, they comprise claims to either truth, normative rightness, or truthfulness (Backlund, 2003). As mentioned above, the anchoring of validity claims is to a large extent carried out apparently without

effort, since the connection to worldviews and cultural traditions is transparent. However, it is also possible to view this as a very rapid process of information exchange, in which large amounts of mostly internal information are exchanged and processed at a tacit level such that *yes* and *no* positions are adopted with respect to the various claims. When problematic expressions occur, the internal resource of information might be exhausted, thereby establishing a specific demand for external information. In line with Limberg's findings, the character of the claim will guide the choice and evaluation of needed information. The information itself constitutes links to the semantic content used for approving or rejecting the claims.

### **Information and knowledge claims**

“What are the various types of information that students handle within the educational context?” was one of the questions discussed within the framework of small focus groups (35 of 55 freshmen in the LIS-programme took part in the discussions). A number of students mentioned certain items on the list, while only one or two brought up others. A brief methodological remark is that the answers were interpreted twice since the group leader first took notes and later entered the content of the notes into a small database.

**Table 1: Answers to the question: What are the various types of information that students handle? (duplicates removed)**

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<b>Administrative</b>
<b>Central Study Support Board</b>
<b>Codes</b>
<b>Curricula</b>
<b>Different types of institutions</b>
<b>Direct advertisement</b>
<b>Discussions with other students</b>
<b>Documents</b>
<b>Email</b>
<b>Email accounts</b>
<b>Facts about the subject studied</b>
<b>Folio information</b>
<b>Görel (Departmental administrator)</b>
<b>Hours</b>
<b>Information about courses</b>
<b>Internet</b>
<b>Lectures</b>
<b>Lecture notes</b>
<b>Library</b>
<b>Listening to yourself and to fellow students</b>
<b>Localities</b>
<b>Marketing</b>
<b>One acquires information from fellow students rather than, for instance, through email</b>
<b>Opening hours</b>
<b>Pamphlets</b>
<b>Pedagogy and administration</b>
<b>Places</b>
<b>Practical information about localities</b>
<b>Printouts concerning computer labs (practices, short texts)</b>
<b>Schedule</b>
<b>Student agency</b>
<b>Student magazine</b>
<b>Study counseling</b>
<b>Teachers' information</b>
<b>Telephone numbers</b>
<b>Occupational opportunities after completing studies</b>
<b>Social development in general (need to reflect upon what's happening)</b>
<b>Tips about various things, such as courses</b>
<b>University</b>
<b>Verbal</b>

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This crude list of information types, given as the students themselves identified them, comprises many different items that may or may not be information (e.g., some items appear to be sources of information). It is helpful here to conceive of information as providing links to semantic content for different claims to validity. The list roughly divides into two parts, *administrative* and *pedagogical or subject related types*. A most striking impression is that the information types that students themselves generate are very limited in number. While there are a few, of which the most important are *lecture notes* and *discussions with other students*, missing are theses, essays, short papers, reading notes, web-pages, group papers, verbal presentations, etc. Why? How is it that students do not look upon themselves as generators or producers of information? We will try to explain this with the help of our theoretical tool.

Conceived of as communicative action, the situation in the LIS programme may be described as having the overall goal of increasing knowledge in the broad area of Library and

Information Science. Some of the intermediary goals include doing research in the area, teaching relevant courses, taking such courses, writing articles and masters theses, publicizing the programme, maintaining professional contacts, competing with other disciplines, etc. These and other goals are attained throughout the organisation through action in a variety of situations: a board meeting decides to allocate money for a new course; the respondent at a seminar agrees to make corrections to a paper; a teacher promises in class to revise the reading list. These actions are carried out by participants reaching out to understand and coordinate their actions while taking *yes* or *no* positions in respect to a vast number of validity claims connected with numerous speech acts.

We can see the peculiar character of the purely educational context when we take a closer look at the courses that constitute a central part of the learning environment. When the students stake claim to their knowledge, they must do so twice. They first must prepare themselves to defend claims connected with their propositions in discussions and conversations with teachers or fellow students, which is the rule for everyone. But they also have to claim, in a normative sense, the rightness of their knowledge in various types of examination situations more or less closely related to the content of the same knowledge. This means that communication in the educational context will be *systematically distorted* since the action orientation of the teachers will more or less differ from the orientation among the students, depending on the assessment methods used. The important issue here is that these orientations will always differ as long as the goal of increasing knowledge is conceived of in a 'realistic' manner by educational organisers but in a 'training' manner by students. For the latter, the most 'realistic' aspect of the goal is at times simply to pass the exam. This action orientation is clearly different than that of the organisers.

In my opinion, this is the main reason why students indicate only a very few artifacts of their own knowledge creation as information. Since short papers, essays, a masters thesis, etc., in a certain sense comprise information for normative claims to validity in the action orientation of examination, enabling the responsible teacher to take a *yes* or *no* stand in respect to whether the students may proceed to the next level in the educational system, they do not count as information for claims to knowledge in the general action orientation of increasing knowledge. Their general cognitive relevance is less important because the theme of examination forces the normative relevance into the foreground. When students, well aware of the overall goal, are asked about the types of information they handle, they respond within the action orientation of increasing knowledge, thereby excluding information types that they view as belonging to another theme. Information within the educational context, as conceived of by the students, is mainly used either for general administrative purposes, or for the direct attainment of the general goal of creating knowledge (e.g., books, lectures, library).

### **Some concluding remarks**

The notion that examination or assessment methods have a bearing on the outcome of any educational enterprise or pedagogical task is by no means new. There is much research dealing with this intrinsic problem space in teaching (e.g., Marton, 1977). The LIS staff are conscious of pedagogical issues and for several years have pursued modern instructional methods, such as PBL. Nevertheless, the problem of diverging reflections, primarily due to examination issues, still persists. In the present discussion, we have investigated the theory of communicative action and the use of information in the lifeworld of the educational context to shed light on this issue, although little more than an example is provided by the small amount of empirical data used. The question is, however, how this type of discussion can be useful in

decreasing or eliminating the negative effects of the distorted communication caused by the differing action orientations. First of all, I believe that the 'norm' of the theory is an important imperative in all actions taken to reduce the negative effects mentioned. The best way to get at the problem is to use communicative action and involve students and staff in actions addressing the issue. When we begin talking about how things are and how we want them to be, the process of change has already started. Such patterns can be made visible for all participants by means of small focus groups that reflect upon knowledge creation. But it is important that these meetings be extracurricular in nature so that the students do not feel they are being scrutinised. Another useful method may be to introduce portfolio tools for the students which, provided they are used, can help students reflect upon their achievements simply by making artifacts of their work visible when gathered and stored in a proper way. The latter method could well be used in combination with a variety of other methods for assessment. Such examples indicate ways in which the investigator can study the context of the lifeworld and, at the same time, pursue changes that will hopefully enhance the situation.

Secondly, I believe there is a need for research on the system level since the problem identified arises to a great degree from systemic interventions in the lifeworld of the educational context. In Sweden, for example, the finance system of the universities pays the organizing department on a per-head basis. Every student registered for a course (up to a certain limit) generates a certain amount of money, but if a specified percentage of students do not complete the course, a sum of money must be returned. This can obviously have an impact on assessments methods. In similar ways, other institutions in society, such as commercial and industrial groups, exert an influence on the educational context in general, including examinations. When conceived of as a subsystem fulfilling functional requirements of the social system, different patterns of intrusion into the lifeworld context of education may be revealed and possibly used to guide further actions. These provide topics for further discussion.

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