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Instructional challenges of incorporating aspects of critical literacy work in digitalised classrooms

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Abstract: This study explores what opportunities for critical literacy work that can be distinguished in the practices of an emerging digitalised classroom and how teachers and students make use of these. Observations were conducted over the course of one semester in three subjects in a Swedish class of 13–14-year olds using individual tablets. The findings presented as thick descriptions suggest that different kinds of opportunities to develop critical literacy evolve in various activities and digital technologies become a resource in students' work. However, these opportunities mainly occur in peer interactions outside the visible control of the teacher and never develop into further critical reflections. The study concludes that a deliberate emphasis on critical literacy work in the design of tasks, especially those that include digital technologies, creates opportunities for students to develop competences that support them in becoming confident users and producers of contemporary texts.

Subjects: ICT; Secondary Education; ICT; Classroom Practice; Language & Power

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Lisa Molin is a former secondary school teacher and researcher at the Department of Applied IT, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, within the fields of digital technologies and educational sciences. Her research centres around the expanding field of critical literacy in digitalised classrooms, with a particular focus on issues of power, equity and justice. Together with the co-authors, she collaborates in research projects that investigate literacy activities in digitalised classrooms as well as changes in communicative patterns in classrooms and in for example social media. All three authors are part of a large research group with a particular research interest in how the use of digital technologies transforms how information and knowledge is circulated in society and the implications that these changes have on learning (<https://lincs.gu.se/>).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Education plays a crucial role in providing students with adequate literacy skills fundamental to actively participate in a democratic society. Most literacy activities today take place online and anyone can participate, which increases the need to provide students with skills not only to take a critical stance towards information but also to become active participants in multimodal, participatory textual environments.

This study explores how students and teachers make use of opportunities for critical literacy work in digitalised classroom activities. Findings show that several opportunities arise. Technologies constitute an important resource for example in increasing access to texts, in bringing diverse perspectives into the classroom and in making students' voices heard through design and redesign of texts. However, opportunities occur mainly in student interaction and do not become visible to the teacher or the larger group, which limits the potential to develop critical literacy. We therefore suggest an increased focus on critical literacy aspects in the design of tasks, in order to highlight and develop critical competences.

Keywords: digitalised classroom; digital technologies; critical literacy work; secondary education

1. Introduction

Education plays an essential role in providing students with adequate literacy skills to support societal participation, equality and justice. Due to the ongoing trend towards digitalisation, we are now moving rapidly and beyond traditional printed texts towards a multitude of new technologies, multimodal texts, media and practices for information use, production and sharing. The interactive features of the Internet are facilitating a growing participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009) where anyone can contribute to knowledge building and public debate. However, such all-encompassing possibilities also imply that anything can be published, and there is increasing concern about the dissemination of disinformation—in other words, fake news (see Hunt, 2016). Thus, as possibilities have arisen for challenging democratic systems, the focus on and requests for critically informed approaches to various information sources have increased (cf. Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013), challenging the traditional literacy practices of education. This study emanates from the requested and prioritised notions of critical literacy competencies in a digital age, which are now formulated in international political agendas (e.g. Carretero, Vuorikari, & Punie, 2017), as well as the national school curricula in Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017).

However, the meanings and implications of critical literacy work in educational practices are often unclear (Johansson & Limberg, 2017). Instead, critical literacy work is commonly used in simplified and limiting ways as a set of criteria for evaluating the reliability and suitability of sources independently of context and purpose. This perspective is increasingly being questioned because it positions the user mainly as a recipient rather than as an agent challenging, questioning or critiquing existing discourses (e.g. Pangrazio, 2016).

Guiding this study is a perspective on critical literacy that takes issues of power into consideration (Freire, 1972; Vasquez, 2005). Within this perspective, several scholars have proposed different models for addressing what it means to be involved in contemporary critical literacy work (e.g. Freebody & Luke, 2003; Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013; Holmes-Henderson, 2014; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2014). Such models propose, for example, discerning persuasion in texts, interrogating issues of motivation and dominance in language as well as critically analysing communication that motivates subsequent social or political action aimed at redressing inequalities. The reader, then, is not only positioned as a recipient but also as an agent with opportunities to gain power, control and access to texts. These models also consider literacy as different social practices and how they might relate to active societal participation (Vasquez, 2005). In a digital society, such literacy practices involve engaging critically with technology and developing an awareness of how cultural understandings and commercial agendas can shape how technology is used to convey information and meaning (Erstad & Amdam, 2014; Pangrazio, 2016).

Janks (2010) explained what it means to consider issues of power within a pedagogical approach. Her interdependent model of critical literacy education highlights four dimensions of critical literacy: power, access, diversity and the design/redesign of texts. The model outlines the different combinations of these dimensions and proposes how these combinations might be interrogated in order to position students in more powerful ways in relation to dominant literacies and give them a voice as meaning makers. Janks (2010) argued that digital tools may facilitate the use and combination of the four dimensions, thus rendering the model a useful tool for exploring opportunities for developing critical literacy work in digital classroom environments.

The concept of critical literacy has received some criticism for being used more for describing implications for instructional practices than its practical implications through empirical studies (Behrman, 2006; Blackburn & Clark, 2007). However, during the past decade, the body of empirical studies on critical literacy work has grown, including those that focus on digital educational

practices (e.g. Avila & Zacher-Pandya, 2013; McNicol, 2016; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Saman, 2018). In fast-changing times, more studies are needed on how critical literacy in a digital society might affect classroom-based instruction. Scholars (cf. Pangrazio, 2016) have emphasised that rapid changes underline the need to elaborate on the conceptual understandings of critical literacy. Thus, empirical studies not only foster an understanding of contemporary classroom practices but also evaluate different theoretical tools in an ongoing discussion.

This article aims to contribute to our understanding of how critical literacy work influences classroom practices by exploring opportunities for such work in a digitalised classroom. Janks' interdependent model of critical literacy education is the analytical tool and allows for contributing to the ongoing discussion on the conceptual understandings of critical literacy. The usefulness of Janks' model for studying classroom practices is also discussed. In focus are the *in situ* literacy practices in a class of 13- and 14-year olds using individual digital tablet devices. The students were observed in several subjects over the course of one semester. Underpinning the study is a sociocultural perspective on learning, where literacy practices are understood as practices for sense-making and communication embedded in the historical, social and cultural contexts of schooling (Street, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Specifically, the aim of this study was to explore the opportunities for critical literacy work that could be distinguished in classroom practices when digital technologies were used as resources in students' literacy activities. It addressed the following research question:

- (1) *What opportunities for critical literacy work can be distinguished in a digitalised classroom, and how do teachers and students exploit these opportunities?*

1.1. Critical literacy

The critical literacy perspective guiding this study is primarily traceable to the Frankfurt School and critical theory of the 1920s and to Freire's theories on critical pedagogy from the 1940s onwards. Such a perspective fundamentally concerns the relations between power, language and meaning making and the need for people to understand and engage in the politics of daily life in a democratic manner (Comber & Nixon, 2005; Fairclough, 1989; Freire, 1972; Janks, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke, 2014).

As a theory, critical literacy espouses that education can foster social justice and democratic participation by allowing students to recognise how language is affected by and affects social relations, for instance, by examining relations of power inherent in language use (Luke, 2014). Critical literacy work within education focuses on how texts are constructed and interplay with readers, how students use texts to learn about themselves and their surrounding world and how texts can be tools for emancipation—that is, allowing students to build common knowledge that may contribute to societal change (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2005). Thus, students are offered opportunities to work with texts and undertake activities that engage them profoundly, since they relate to their interests and experiences, rather than school-based interests (Blackburn & Clark, 2007). As such, authentic purposes and genuine audiences are also emphasised (Vasquez & Felderman, 2013). Critical, respectful discussions about texts (Mercer & Littleton, 2013) enable students to practise various ways of arguing, adopting different perspectives and making their voices heard by designing and redesigning texts (e.g. Correa, 2009).

As described in Section 1, Janks' (2010) proposed model for critical literacy education highlights four interdependent conceptual dimensions: power, access, diversity and design/redesign. To understand aspects of *power*, Janks (2010) maintained that students need broad *access* to texts, including both dominant forms and texts representing different interests and experiences. *Diversity* in this model refers to the inclusion of different perspectives in the classroom. By, for example, highlighting students' different perspectives, diversity encourages students to question taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices and supports them in developing their awareness of different perspectives in texts. Alternative perspectives can also be purposefully introduced by classroom

teachers and used when *designing* and *redesigning* texts. Using a number of resources (e.g. traditional texts, pictures and audio), then, becomes a means for challenging existing discourses.

1.2. Previous research on critical literacy work in education

This study focused specifically on critically informed approaches to contemporary textual practices that take issues of power into consideration (Freire, 1972; Vasquez, 2005). Therefore, of particular interest were prior studies exploring critical literacy work informed by the dimensions of power, access, diversity and design/redesign (Janks, 2010). Although the body of research addressing such work in digitalised classrooms is growing, these studies are still scarce. Empirical studies on analogue literacy practices addressing dimensions of critical literacy are therefore also included.

A common finding in this field of research is that when students are offered opportunities to approach texts critically in classroom practices, they learn to share their own ideas and explore the perspectives of others (e.g. Moller, 2012; Peterson & Mosley-Wetzel, 2015). Thus, providing broad access to many different texts may both confirm *diverse* perspectives already existing in the classroom practice and bring about new ones that might serve as a premise for students' discussions. In the literature, discussions in the classroom are described as having a positive effect on students' learning and development (e.g. Howe, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007), and students are more likely to engage when talking with their peers outside the visible control of their teacher (Barnes & Todd, 1995). Such talk enables them to take more active and independent ownership of knowledge.

In Peterson and Mosley-Wetzel's (2015) intervention study, the teacher had a more direct presence in students' discussions when they worked on critical text analysis in workshops aimed at supporting them in expressing their different perspectives through text discussions and by designing their own texts. After only a few workshops, the students had developed confidence and had become more active in classroom discussions. However, unexpected tensions arose when the students strongly criticised classroom and school practices. Peterson and Mosley-Wetzel (2015) concluded that critical reading and writing workshops open up opportunities for students to develop a voice, social action and critical expression, which might clash with the dominant, authoritative and standardised practices in school. Dealing with these tensions is a way of recognising education's role as part of larger societal power structures and is an important aspect of consistent critical literacy work in educational settings.

The digitalisation of classrooms over the last decade has granted students greater access to a wide range of multimodal texts, offering multitudinous ways of describing the world and of interpreting, questioning and redesigning the texts (Hinrichen & Coombs, 2013; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2014). This may increase students' ability to develop a personal and critical connection to texts and invoke their interests and experiences, enabling critical discussions about texts and encouraging the sharing of texts with a wider audience (cf. Dalton & Jocius, 2013). Online participation is also considered to create the potential to discuss, create content and share resources of common interest to adolescents, allowing for more perspectives in classroom practices (Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016; Ranieri, Rosa, & Manca, 2016). Moreover, it is argued that students who participate in online discussions via social media become more engaged in interactions, since they address an authentic audience (e.g. Åkerlund, 2013; Vasquez & Felderman, 2013).

For example, Åkerlund (2013) explored how four Swedish middle school classes used blogs and Skype to discuss their schoolwork with other classes in both Sweden and Tanzania. He suggested that access to digital technologies in school offers opportunities for real-life assignments and also allows students' productions to reach authentic audiences. Moreover, students tend to exert more effort in producing texts when they know that these texts are to be published and viewed by a wider audience. Åkerlund (2013) claimed that in an assignment on freedom of expression and democracy, students perceived the blog as a shared project between them and the teacher. As a

result, their goal became to write for actual recipients rather than to produce something that would merely be read and assessed by the teacher.

However, Manca and Grion (2017) found that there was a lack of engagement when secondary school students expressed their views on school quality and policy on Facebook. One reason seemed to be that students were resistant to blend their school and social lives. Several other studies have confirmed this finding (Gosper, Malfroy, & McKenzie, 2013; Maishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012). Furthermore, Manca and Grions (2017) added that students lacked both the specific competencies and skills necessary to take part in such a civic engagement project.

Several studies have also shown that the use of digital technologies increases opportunities for students to engage with texts that might invoke their personal interests and experiences. Personal engagement is considered to be fundamental in the *design or redesign* of texts (e.g. Author & Co-author, 2016; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Öman & Sofkova-Hashemi, 2015; Wood & Jocius, 2014). For example, Wood and Jocius (2014) studied how digital technologies engage students' out-of-school literacies when redesigning texts as critical responses to literature. Their study revealed that podcasting and text-audio-visual applications, for example, provided students with opportunities to negotiate, make choices and present texts in various ways that exhibited their unique interests, experiences and perspectives. Wood and Jocius (2014) concluded that providing spaces where out-of-school literacies are valued and students' voices can be heard creates opportunities for critical literacy work. However, the authors also emphasised that digital devices are not "magic wands" that instantly bring about critical literacy work. Instead, as with all technologies, what is made possible depends on what teachers and students do with the tools.

Previous studies have shown that an obstacle to including critical perspectives in classrooms is that educational literacy practices tend to emphasise traditional skills, such as decoding and understanding texts, leaving little room for broad access to texts or critical discussions around texts that consider students' particular interests, experiences and perspectives (Author, & Co-author, 2016; Schmidt, 2013). Another obstacle is that classroom practices are often based on individualistic approaches, rather than on dialogue and interaction (Billmayer, 2015; Schmidt, 2013). Schmidt (2013) showed that opportunities to design or redesign texts are few and, in general, classroom practices are based on individualistic approaches with traditional text and exercise books, thereby limiting opportunities for critical discussions around texts. The results of the study showed that established classroom practices often strongly support more traditional skills of deciphering and producing texts. Schmidt (2013) further argued that even if activities are designed to invoke students' own interests, there is no guarantee that their experiences will become a resource in literacy work.

In sum, on one hand, the extant research stresses the importance of implementing activities that differ from and expand traditional practices (e.g. Åkerlund, 2013; Peterson & Mosley-Wetzel, 2015; Wood & Jocius, 2014). On the other hand, many studies show that traditional school structures have a strong impact and constrain critical literacy work (Author, & Co-author, 2016; Schmidt, 2013; Wood & Jocius, 2014). The present study contributes to this field of knowledge by exploring the *in situ* literacy practices in a digital classroom environment, with a focus on possible opportunities for critical literacy work.

2. Method

2.1. Setting

The study presented in this article was part of a larger research project conducted in a Swedish suburban school during the 2011–2012 school year. The school was selected due to its tablet venture in a class of 13- and 14-year olds, where each student was equipped with a tablet for use in most classroom activities in the majority of theoretical subjects. At this point in time, tablet technology was still quite new and the new features made this technology of particular interest for

understanding what the new technology may have to offer to learning practices. Although the study did not involve the explicit examination of students' prior digital skills, the students generally had experience using digital technologies at home and in their personal lives before the venture.

The same group of students was followed for 6 months in the five theoretical subjects where the tablets were most frequently used (mathematics, natural sciences, history, English and Swedish). The class comprised 24 students—11 girls and 13 boys. Since this article focuses particularly on critical literacy work, examples are taken from three subjects (history, English and Swedish) in which sequences involving opportunities for critical literacy work were distinguished.

2.2. Data collection and analysis of the empirical data

The empirical material was generated through participant observations with accompanying field notes and video recordings (Baker, Green, & Skukauskaite, 2008) of the students' literacy activities, whenever possible. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted to enable the students and teachers to express how they regard situations from their own points of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Due to the school's organisation of projects, lessons and cross-curricular activities, some weeks allowed for 3–4 days of field work, while others allowed for only a few hours. Altogether, the class was observed for approximately 50 h and videorecorded for approximately 10 h. Of this, 30 h of observation and 6 h of video involved the three theoretical subjects discussed in this article.

The participant observations were documented with field notes to form a general overview of the classroom. During the first 3 weeks, observations (rather than the students' verbal interactions) were used to get to know the setting and for the teachers and students to become used to the researcher's presence. After this, video recordings were gradually introduced. For practical reasons, a single video camera was used both to capture class activities and to zoom in on individuals or groups. This meant that not all activity sequences or students were closely recorded. The video recordings were conducted to allow the researchers to transcribe the students' talk and to return to the recordings to repeatedly analyse important segments (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010).

The semi-structured interviews were done *in situ* and, respecting the respondents' wishes, they were documented through field notes and not taped. Taking notes during the interviews could involve risks of being off-putting to some respondents and confining the potential of the interview situation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). To minimise such risks during documentation, and to secure the qualitative aspects as much as possible, the interviewer was careful to follow up and clarify the meanings of relevant aspects of the answers during the interview, interpret the data throughout the interview and try to verify the interpretations of the respondents' answers in the course of the interviews (Silverman, 1997).

The above-described empirical materials constitute the foundation of the analytical work. To illustrate the classroom activities and the students' interactions with one another and their teachers, the material is presented as ethnographic narratives as part of a *thick description* (Geertz, 1973). A thick description is intended to describe a social action and interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies and motivations that characterise a particular episode (Hollaway, 1997).

Table 1 gives an overview of the empirical data generated.

The analysis was informed by the field notes and video recordings using interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) and focusing on how the participants utilised various resources in the context and the relationship between technology and use. Studying interaction in classrooms involves focusing both on what students and teachers say and how they act with different tools. An important assumption in interaction analysis that corresponds with the sociocultural tradition

Table 1. Overview of the study data

Subject	Lesson sequence	Data collection method	Type of data
History	Discussions after having watched the movie <i>Gladiator</i>	Participant observations	Small group and whole class discussions concerning source criticisms of the movie
English	Oral keynote presentations of events, phenomena and gods in ancient Greece	Participant observations, interviews	Keynote presentations with pictures and oral comments, interviews
Swedish	Reading novels and writing reflections in a class blog	Video recordings, participant observations	Step-by-step instructions given by the teacher to the whole class concerning how to use the blog Writing in the blog individually and in pairs

is that knowledge and action are situated in the interaction between participants while they conduct activities. However, we have not included excerpts with turn-taking, as is common in interaction analysis, since we have chosen to illustrate the data generated from the combined sources as ethnographic narratives by thick descriptions.

The first step of the analysis was to view the video material and field notes to create a broad transcript of the classroom interaction. During this phase, all video recordings and field notes were broadly transcribed to select possible sequences for a more in-depth analysis. Then longer chunks of interaction were reviewed and transcribed and, thereafter, certain cases were selected for further analysis and transcription. These cases were selected as illustrative instances of critical literacy work that to a varying extent involved digital tools. A careful analysis of the selected instances was then conducted. Scrutinising and comparing different sequences allowed the researchers to draw analytical conclusions about the ways in which particular cases could be said to involve instances of critical literacy work. Thereafter, the sequences were analysed by using Janks (2010) interdependent model of critical literacy work. The four fundamental dimensions of critical literacy in Janks (2010) model—*power, access, diversity and design/redesign*—were used to analyse the different aspects of critical literacy work, such as access to texts and diverse perspectives within activities, how the texts appealed to students' interests and experiences and the extent to which the activities involved the design/redesign of texts.

Most of the original empirical materials were in Swedish (except for a few from the English lesson). Therefore, the excerpts were translated into English while taking into consideration the essence of what the students said. In most cases, the translations were done word-by-word with respect to the specific activity (Duranti, 1997). Thus, the Swedish expressions used by the students were translated into colloquial English expressions to account for the fact that the empirical material comprises communication between 13- and 14-year-old students.

2.3. Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the Swedish Research Council (2017) ethical guidelines and ethical rules for social science research, including requirements for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy, highlighting that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time by an individual teacher or student. All students and teachers were informed about the research objectives and aims and signed a consent form indicating their consent to participate in the study and to be recorded in the classroom. Since all students were below 18 years of age, their parents also signed the consent forms. The students who participated in the recordings and, thus, the used excerpts expressly provided consent to participate in the study. Pseudonyms are used for the students.

3. Findings

This section presents and analyses the assignments and activities in which the teachers and students engaged during three lessons. The ethnographic narratives serve as illustrative examples of different instances of critical work that occurred in the classrooms. They are followed by an analysis highlighting these instances and relating them to issues of *power*, *access*, *diversity* and *design/redesign*.

3.1. History

The assignment in the observed history lesson was for students to finish watching the last part of the movie *Gladiator*, which was streamed from an online resource and projected onto a screen. *Gladiator* is a historical drama about the Roman general Maximus Decimus Meredius, who, due to unlucky circumstances, is forced to become a gladiator. Therefore, the movie focuses heavily on the lives of Roman gladiators. The students were instructed to discuss in small groups the movie's credibility according to their knowledge of antiquity and to present a summary of their discussions to the whole class. The students were also instructed to continue their discussions for approximately 20 min and to be critical of the movie's credibility (e.g. its portrayal of various settings, the gladiator culture and the rise and fall of emperors). Finally, the students were prompted to justify their answers and refer to concrete evidence to support their opinions. One student in each group took notes.

3.1.1. Ethnographic description 1

After the students have finished watching the last 20 min of the movie, they form small groups of three or four. One student is selected to take notes on the tablet. During the first part of the discussion, the two observed groups are strictly focused on the assignment, to determine the movie's credibility. All participants are active and seem engaged. They refer to how different scenes are pictured and how these scenes appear to relate to what they have learnt about the time period. Some students also raise central issues from antiquity (e.g. the role of the emperor), some of which are included in the movie, while some are not. After a while, the students immerse themselves in their discussions and begin talking about general aspects of movie production. One of the groups raises the issue of the complexity involved in turning historical events into commercial Hollywood movies. Claims are made that in order to reach a broad audience, historical events are often adapted (e.g. in the script and editing phases), a process that might distort historical authenticity.

After the students finish working in their small groups, the teacher conducts a class discussion. One-by-one, each group presents its reflections on the movie's authenticity. The teacher responds to the students by confirming their perspectives or asking for more examples from the movie as evidence. Peers are also allowed to add to the discussion by commenting on the presentations. The class discussion lasts only 10 min and focuses on the topics in the teacher's initial instructions (i.e. the credibility of the movie in relation to authentic historical events).

The students are familiar with Hollywood movies like *Gladiator*. Although it was released more than 10 years ago, the actors are still well known, and the story has a recognisable plot of heroes, love and the battle between good and evil. By providing the students with *access* to textual experiences outside of school via a movie, rather than focusing exclusively on school-based interests, the studied lesson was seen to make literacy work accessible to students and give them opportunities to engage (cf. Blackburn & Clark, 2007). This was visible in the students' engagement in their discussions, which involved intense debate and displayed their familiarity with the text.

The design of the observed assignment involved aspects of critical literacy and was explicitly introduced to the students through prompts to critically discuss the movie's credibility in relation to antiquity. As illustrated in ethnographic description 1, the students initially followed this instruction and discussed central credibility issues. However, they finished this prompted discussion rather quickly and then expanded their critical reflections to topics related to the plots of

commercial movies and how history is adapted to reach a broad audience. These discussions can be analytically understood as concerning issues of *power*, here focusing on the film industry (cf. Janks, 2010). The students showed an awareness of how power is mirrored in the way that merchandising is considered more important for the film industry than the authenticity of a historical event. Determining a movie's credibility, therefore, can be considered as an activity that sparks critical reflection connected to issues of power.

The students' discussions on narratives in movies with commercial interests also questioned the *design* of texts. Janks (2010) argued that questioning the design of texts is fundamental for redesigning texts in terms of changing prevalent societal perspectives. By expanding the teacher's instructions and considering general issues regarding movie production, the discussions created opportunities for students to elaborate on how texts are designed and how they could be redesigned.

The students' discussions built on their familiarity with movies and allowed them to express a diversity of perspectives (Janks, 2010). Thus, access to online movie resources may increase opportunities to connect to students' out-of-school literacies. The diverse perspectives in the peer discussions show that the students took their own experiences as a point of departure, which is consistent with the findings of Peterson and Mosley-Wetzel (2015) and Åkerlund (2013).

However, these expanded discussions in small groups were not part of the whole class discussion, which merely focused on the given assignment: exploring the movie's historical credibility. Consequently, the students' critical reflections in relation to power, the redesign of texts and their own experiences, which were derived from and expanded the assignment, remained limited to the smaller group discussions (cf. Billmeyer, 2015; Schmidt, 2013), and opportunities to engage in critical literacy work involving the teacher and all peers remained unexploited.

3.2. English

The English assignment extended the theme of antiquity. Students had to make individual multimodal presentations about the same time period as in the history lesson. The students were allowed to individually choose what content to present. All students chose to use the same tablet-based slide presentation software application to present their work in front of the class. Further, all students used Google to search for information and images for their presentations. In general, the students undertook the assignment by searching for content and, after determining what to use, looking for images or other multimodal features to visibly reinforce what they planned to say or write. The observation of the presentations was followed up with interviews with students.

3.2.1. Ethnographic description 2

The students project their presentations onto the screen at the front of the room. They cover a great variety of subjects ranging from Greek gods to fashion reports to discussions of how people led their daily lives during antiquity. The presentations are built mainly on images, and the students speak rather freely about the content. One of the students, Adam, talks about Zeus and uses images that are artistic and classic. Another student, Axel, focuses on everyday life in ancient Greece, discussing what people did, the structure of society, work, religion, school and so on. His selection of images is vast and displays many different situations, such as people standing in groups, individuals doing handicrafts and students in a classroom. Most of the images depict men. The presentations present the found content in English as a way of practising English as a second language, and reflections on the process of creating the presentations are not part of the presentations.

In the interviews after class, Adam, who chose to present on Zeus, says that he wanted to show the power and force of the Greek god. Furthermore, he says that he used pictures depicting Zeus looking down on people, posing in a grandiose, classic style, to reinforce his position as a superior god. Axel, on the other hand, chose to present people's everyday lives. He claims that by using a

wide variety of images that did not conform to any particular style, he sought to show the diversity of Greek people and activities. However, though he tried to search extensively for images of women, he could not find any. The only pictures in which women were prominent, he says, were those that pictured fashion. This is why the images in his presentation predominantly portrayed the lives of men.

The free choice of a topic within a given task presented opportunities for students to engage in critical literacy work related to a well-known way of narrating. All students responded to this by choosing different topics relating to their interests (e.g. religious issues or societal conditions) and incorporating information from the different sources to which they had access. The students *designed* their own texts but in so doing also *redesigned* the sources they used when incorporating them in their presentations. They were provided access to a great variety of resources when searching for the content on which to base their presentations. In the interviews, the students reflected on the choices they had made when creating their presentations, thereby conveying their conscious decisions involving critical perspective work. For example, Adam showed an awareness of how his chosen pictures (i.e. of Zeus being grandiose and looking down on others) depicted a notion of *power* by displaying Zeus as a superior god, whilst Axel described difficulties displaying diversity due to a lack of pictures of women, thereby displaying his awareness of gender and power issues.

The students used digital technologies throughout the activity: when searching for information and pictures online, when designing texts and when presenting. During this last step of presenting, technology created a space for sharing, through which diverse perspectives could become public. Furthermore, access to information through search engines facilitated *diversity*, which is an intrinsic part of the assignment because the students had to decide what to include and what to exclude. Since all students chose to use the same application for their presentations, the texts became visibly uniform; however, to some degree, the diversity of topics made it possible for the students to design their presentations in personal and varied ways. Even though the use of digital technologies to design texts opened up opportunities for diversity, the analysis of the English lesson clearly shows that most of the activity's critical literacy work was lost in the presentations. This indicates the strong impact of schooling's focus on assignment-solving activities above all else (Blackburn & Clark, 2007; also cf. Wood & Jocius, 2014). In the interviews, the students reflected on their working process, indicating that by following the process more closely, not only the end product but also the critical literacy work would have become more visible. Several researchers have argued for the need to evaluate and assess the process as well as the product in order to understand students' compositions (e.g. Burke & Hammet, 2009; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2009). By studying students' compositional process, it is possible to make visible how multimodal compositions are created in a situated practice perspective as well as to highlight students' decisions in, for example, using certain images (e.g. Collier & Kendrick, 2016; Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2006; Nixon, 2001). Allowing the students to reflect on their compositional process also shed light on the critical literacy work that they had engaged in during the process.

3.3. Swedish

As part of the Swedish class, students read novels individually and posted their reflections in a common class blog, which was not publicly accessible but was available to the class, the teacher and the students' parents. According to the teacher, the use of a blog was intended to make the students' work transparent by providing them access to their classmates' diverse perspectives. The lesson was part of a theme that lasted for several weeks and that focused on reading and reflecting on novels. No particular instruction was given concerning the choices of novels, genres or themes; however, all of the novels had to be typographical texts. The postings in the class blog were guided by a weekly question posted by the teacher. The lesson prior to the observed lesson had focused on determining whether the things happening in the students' novels could happen in real life. In the week of the observation, the teacher asked the students about the genres of their novels and asked them to justify their answers.

3.3.1. Ethnographic description 3

First, the students spend approximately 30 min on their individual readings. Some have chosen novels from the school library, some have brought books from home and some have borrowed books online and are reading them on their tablets. Before answering this week's question, the students are instructed to log on to the blog, find the previous week's blog posts and read through them. The teacher praises their development and asks them to pay attention to cases in which students have written longer segments of text. The teacher says that reading through their classmates' posts may inspire the students and give them ideas on how to improve their own writing. After the students have finished reading the blog posts, the teacher explains the definition of "genre" and involves the students in proposing ideas for genres, a number of which are listed on the whiteboard (e.g. mystery, fantasy, drama, detective story and historical fiction). The students are not instructed to discuss in groups before writing in the blog, but some form small groups and do so anyway. Two groups are observed, and the students in these groups spend a few minutes checking their comprehension of the genres of their novels with one another. After this, they move back to the blog to write the posts. Though composing the posts is a focused activity, the students continue their discussions as they sit in the classroom. Some students show classmates what they have written before they make their posts public.

The blog posts vary widely in content and length. Some are only direct replies to the assignment:

Anders: It is a comedy story because the main character says funny things.

Jessica: I know it is a detective story because there has been a murder and there is a female officer set out to solve the case.

Others reflect on complexities related to the comprehension of the text:

Andrea: It is hard to know if the book I am reading is a drama or a detective story. There has been a murder, but much of the story has a focus on the relationships between people. The murder and the solving of it is only one part of the story. There is, for example, a love story going on between two of the characters.

The design of the writing assignment can be seen as an instructional effort to make the students' argumentation public and to make the students aware of the *diversity* of reading experiences (cf. Peterson & Mosley-Wetzel, 2015). This aligns with previous research indicating that students often put more effort into productions that are publicly displayed (e.g. Åkerlund, 2013).

The teacher's reference to the previous week's blog was intended to encourage the students to pay attention to the qualitative aspects of texts that might help them improve their reflections. However, since the instruction focused on the length of the texts, it supported quantity rather than quality. Due to the students' age, prompting them to write longer texts could have implied that they needed to actually consider their rationalities, which could, in turn, encourage them to develop more profound and critical reasoning. However, many students did not write longer posts; instead, they stayed strictly on task by briefly identifying the genres of the books and justifying these identifications.

Andreas' blog post is an example of a post that was not only longer than most posts but also questioned the design of the text and discussed how ambiguities complicate reflecting on a text's genre. Consequently, this post contributed to the idea that making students' reading argumentations public improves their critical thinking—a result that would not have been possible to the same extent through analogue practices (cf. Vasquez, 2005). However, in this case, whether or not students developed qualitative knowledge related to the end product and their writing did not

depend on instructional support but on their individual skills and previous textual experience (cf. Schmidt, 2013).

The Swedish lesson provided several opportunities to develop critical literacy work. The *design* of the texts to be shared in the blog provided students with *access* to the content of many different novels and also enabled them to take part in their peers' *diverse* reading experiences, which would not have been possible to the same extent without technology. However, the assignment did not explicitly require a reflective answer, and most students chose to straightforwardly solve the task (cf. Blackburn & Clark, 2007). Moreover, the teacher's instructional guidance on how the students could develop their writing might not have been sufficient for all students to develop qualitative aspects of the end product. As a result, the blog only modestly developed into the diverse sharing space that the teacher had intended it to be.

4. Discussion

This study explored which opportunities for critical literacy worked in a digitalised classroom and how the teachers and students utilised these opportunities. The findings show that even though the assignments and end products did not always explicitly include critical literacy work, there were distinguishable windows of opportunity for developing critical literacy work.

The teachers incorporated different aspects of critical literacy work (Janks, 2010) into the designs of the assignments for their particular classes. This was seen in the history lesson, in the design of the assignment that included a discussion on the *credibility* of the movie *Gladiator*. This activity involved reflections on *power*, which were important for identifying the dominant discourses. In the English lesson, the assignment included aspects of both *access* and *diversity* by prompting the students to choose subjects and search for information online. Further, the goal of the assignment was to make individual multimodal presentations, which also implied the *design* of text that provided opportunities for the students to illustrate diverse perspectives of antiquity in personal and varied ways. Finally, in the Swedish lesson, the aim was to share and take part in peers' *diverse* reading experiences. Thereby, the assignment provided *access* to the content of many different novels through the use of a blog. The goal for the students was to engage with one another's views and, thus, develop an understanding of the diversity of perspectives other than their own. Here, the teacher intentionally used the blog to provide a space where the students could share and discuss their different perspectives with a wider and genuine audience (cf. Vasquez & Felderman, 2013). Thus, designing texts in a closed blog allowed the students to practise the act of raising their opinions and displaying different views in a safe, online environment.

However, the aspects of critical literacy work prompted by the design of the assignments were seldom manifested in the final products. Instead, in their small groups, the students made use of different aspects of critical literacy work and sometimes also aspects other than those intended by their teachers. This was evident, for example, in the history lesson when the students reasoned in terms of *power* in their discussion on the creation of the film. Similarly, in the English lesson, even though the students did not invoke *diversity* in their methods of presentation, they did raise issues of *power* in their choices of subjects, which they mentioned in the interviews. Finally, the analysis of the Swedish lesson illustrated that the creation of a blog to reach a broader audience did not implicitly spark effort to write more extensive justifications.

The findings of this study also imply the potential that omnipresent digital technologies have as resources for developing critical literacy work, for example, by increasing access to texts and online activities that make it possible to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom practice. Such technology is also frequently used for students' text productions. However, the findings of this study show that the teachers did not explicitly emphasise the role of technology; rather, technology became implicit in the design of tasks. Designs that more explicitly scaffold the use of technology as a resource for accessing texts, understanding diverse perspectives and designing/

redesigning texts would, therefore, likely increase the potential for students' critical reflections around texts to be evident in their end products.

In a general sense, several opportunities for critical literacy work were identified in the observed lessons, and digital technologies can be an important resource in this work. These opportunities were identified as occurring when introducing students to broad access to texts, when challenging them to take part in diverse perspectives and when *designing/redesigning* texts in personal and varied ways. Opportunities for critical work were most evident in the students' interactions with each other when the classroom activities related to texts involving their personal experiences (cf. Blackburn & Clark, 2007; Schmidt, 2013; Wood & Jocius, 2014). However, as these group discussions were rarely part of the whole class discussions, they remained invisible to the teacher and most other students.

Moreover, since traditional classroom practices tend to focus on carrying out assignments and presenting products, students' opportunities to engage in critical literacy practices, evident in their reflections and discussions, were limited in the end products (cf. Player-Koro, Tallvid, & Lindström, 2014). Opportunities for critical literacy work occurred mainly outside the visible control of the teacher and largely remained hidden to the teacher. Consequently, when critical perspectives were included in the students' discussions, they were mainly based on the students' own initiatives, prior experiences and knowledge, rather than being supported and developed as explicit parts of classroom activities. Although the use of tablets was frequent, this was rarely scaffolded as a resource for developing critical aspects of the lesson design. Even though valuable aspects or different kinds of critical literacy work were highly visible in the course of the students' activities, as indicated before, they were often invisible in the final products, presentations and whole class discussions. Thus, instances of such critical literacy reflections rarely involved the teacher or larger groups of students. Consequently, the teacher seldom noticed opportunities for engaging in critical literacy work, and it did not become a central part of the classroom discussions.

Peer discussions are vastly described in the literature as supporting students' learning (e.g. Grady & Fisher, 1993; Howe, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) and are also argued to create opportunities for students to engage in critical literacy work (Barnes & Todd, 1995). Despite such conclusions, earlier research has claimed that classroom practices more often are based on individual approaches than on dialogue and interaction (e.g. Billmeyer, 2015; Schmidt, 2013). However, this study provides an example of a general instructional design allowing students to be frequently involved in interactional work. Sometimes, such work was explicitly instructed, as in the history lesson, when the assignment involved discussing the design of power structures in the movie. Sometimes, the interaction was less explicit in the lesson design and based more on students' initiatives, such as when some students formed small groups and discussed the blog assignment in the Swedish lesson. Further, in the interviews in the English lesson, students expressed critical reflections when they were less focused on the final product and instead reflected on the different choices they had made when designing their multimodal presentations. Thus, interviews or group discussions where students reflect on their processes might provide opportunities both for peers and teachers to take part of critical perspectives in the ongoing work. Finally, explicit instructional guidance on how to develop reflective and critical qualities in texts, and how to use digital technologies more specifically for such intentions, would have been useful for the students' design of texts in the English and Swedish lessons. The use of the blog in the Swedish lesson is an example of when digital technologies explicitly enhance opportunities to share critical reflections with many at the same time. Therefore, specific scaffolding of how critical reflections might be designed and developed would also bear the potential to enhance the role of the blog as a space for deep and extensive critical reflections shared with a wider audience.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that several opportunities for critical literacy work were distinguishable in the lesson design and classroom activities. The use of digital technologies was

frequent in all activities and served as a potential resource particularly for providing broad access to texts and diverse perspectives, but also opportunities to design/redesign texts in personal and varied ways (cf. Blackburn & Clark, 2007). However, even though the lesson design provided opportunities for students' reasoning regarding issues of power and language, such instances occurred mainly in small group interactions and rarely became visible to the teacher or the larger group of students.

According to earlier research, implementing critical literacy work in classroom practices can be challenging due to the focus of traditional practices on quantity and products rather than on quality and process (cf. Behrman, 2006; Blackburn & Clark, 2007). Research has also shown that individualistic approaches are an obstacle for developing critical perspectives (cf. Billmeyer, 2015; Schmidt, 2013). Although traditional patterns, such as making use of the content and producing end products, have a strong impact on the studied classroom practice, they must be considered simultaneously as a practice, taking the first steps towards exploring the use of digital technologies for knowledge building and learning. Contrary to earlier studies (cf. Billmeyer, 2015), this study shows that even though traditional practices might constitute an obstacle for critical literacy work, there is an openness to students' formal and informal discussions. This openness, together with the use of technology for accessing and sharing texts, opens up windows of opportunity which may provide an important point of departure for further development.

In a democratic society, the need for critical literacy perspectives is increasingly emphasised. As stated in the introduction to this paper, knowledge of the relation between power and language becomes particularly relevant in a world where anyone can publish almost anything. Thus, expanding critical work with texts in school, beyond traditional information source criticism, is becoming increasingly important. Students must develop confidence for dealing with all kinds of texts, both as consumers and producers. As seen in this study, instances of critical literacy work occurred mostly in small group interactions but remained invisible to the teacher and the larger group of students. To further develop these instances and make them visible in the classroom practice in general, students may be prompted to include critical aspects in their end products. However, to ensure the visibility of critical literacy also in the working process, students also need scaffolding of how to deconstruct and discuss texts, and how they can use digital technologies as a resource, such as how to share their work during ongoing activities. Furthermore, greater involvement of the teacher is needed in the process of designing and redesigning texts in order for critical aspects of this process to be recognised and evaluated. Thus, we argue that deliberately emphasising critical literacy work in instructional designs, especially in activities including digital technologies, will give students opportunities to develop competencies that will support them in becoming confident users and producers of contemporary texts. However, the extent to which digital technologies may facilitate or restrain critical literacy work is an empirical question that needs to be revisited. Moreover, studies in which tasks and end products focus specifically on engaging students in critical literacy work are needed to inform both the field of research and practitioners by contributing knowledge of how changes to task designs may interplay with activities involving critical literacy work in classrooms.

This was a small qualitative study, and we make no claims of providing a complete picture of a classroom practice. Neither was the aim to evaluate the critical literacy work of a practice with no explicit objective of bringing issues of power to the surface. However, by identifying windows of opportunity that occurred in ordinary, ongoing classroom activities, the study offers insight into possibilities of instances of critical literacy work and suggests how they could be developed. Thereby, the study serves as a point of departure for further studies by contributing knowledge of *in situ* critical literacy work that can inform a complex field of research (Guba, 1981). Janks (2010) interdependent model of critical literacy education was used to analyse instances of critical literacy work. In order to empirically make claims about whether and how students may develop critical literacy in educational practices, more longitudinal studies are needed. However, the contribution of

this study is its claim that opportunities for critical literacy work can be studied and also how teachers and students utilise these opportunities. When studying such issues, Janks' model may serve as a tool for analysing *in situ* opportunities for, and instances of, critical literacy work.

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