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Optimising student learning and engagement in initial vocational education

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Chapter 5

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS FOR VOCATIONAL ORIENTATION

This study investigates student engagement in school learning. In a two-year research project involving a secondary school conducting pre-vocational education, we developed a curriculum unit designed to foster 'communities of learners for vocational orientation'. In this chapter, we examine the specific role of this community of learners as a pedagogical space that contributes to student engagement in learning. We suggest that a community of learners allows students to experience and overcome 'boundary experiences' i.e. experiences of not being able to function adequately in a new situation, which encourages student engagement in school learning. Grounded theory was used to analyse video recordings of a small group of students, interviews with these students about their perceptions of the teaching-learning activities and their engagement in learning related to these activities as well as the products and assessments they completed during the unit. The results show that working as a community of learners for vocational orientation, as operationalised in the unit, enhances student engagement due to the emergence and processing of boundary experiences, particularly through organising actual border-crossing between school and vocational practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although schools aim to prepare students for their futures, not all students appreciate the value of school learning. Both schools and students contribute to this lack of appreciation. Students generally focus on the present, and their actions are often not informed by a clear and developed perspective concerning their future (Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2011). Schools, even when the subject content is contextualised within the relevant professional fields, do not always manage to address the latent questions that students have regarding their future. For example, in the Netherlands, at the end of pre-vocational secondary education, approximately 45% of the students are not certain about which vocational choice to make (Neuvel & Van Esch, 2010). Allowing students to explore their own ways of participating in society can contribute to their appreciation of the benefits of learning at school (Flum & Kaplan, 2006) and enhance student engagement in school learning (Ten Dam, Volman, & Wardekker, 2004).

Students enrolled in pre-vocational education usually enter the labour market sooner than students on the pre-academic track. For these students, it is therefore even more important to approach the curriculum content as a means of orientating towards and understanding vocational practices. In the Dutch secondary education system, pre-vocational education complements general, pre-academic education. At

age 12, students are selected to enrol in one of these two types of education. The central aim of pre-vocational education is to further develop students' general competencies (e.g. language, mathematics) and to prepare them for senior secondary vocational education by exploring one of four sectors—Engineering & Technology, Care & Welfare, Business and Agriculture. As such, vocational orientation is a crucial aspect of pre-vocational education.

The concept of a community of learners has been proposed as a means to design a more meaningful and engaging curriculum (Campioni, Shapiro, & Brown, 1995; Engle & Conant, 2002; Matusov, Von Dyke, & Han, 2012). In a design research project that lasted two years, we developed curriculum units that foster communities of learners for vocational orientation. We assumed that the curriculum units would be meaningful and engaging, because communities of learners of this kind allow the design of situations in which students encounter 'boundary experiences' (Meijers & Wardekker, 2003) i.e. experiences of not being able to function adequately in a new situation. The concept of community of learners also suggests ways of providing guidance and support for students to overcome these experiences. Establishing school learning around boundary experiences can help students make sense of themselves as vocational professionals and shape their future (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008).

In this study, we examine one of the curriculum units in depth. We analyse video recordings of a small group of students throughout the curriculum unit, interviews with these students about their perceptions of the teaching-learning activities and their engagement during these activities and the products and assessments they completed during the unit. The aim of our study is to contribute to a theoretical understanding of student engagement in a community of learners enrolled in pre-vocational education.

1.1 Engagement in communities of learners

'Engagement' can be described as a multifaceted construct with three dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004)—*emotional engagement* refers to students' feelings with regards to their teachers, classmates and school; *cognitive engagement* is the willingness to make mental efforts to acquire the curriculum content; *behavioural engagement* entails positive conduct as well as involvement in learning and other school-related activities. Like Fredricks et al. (2004), we view behaviour, emotion and cognition as dynamically interrelated within the individual instead of as isolated processes. Communities of learners can address each of these aspects of engagement. Matusov, Van Dyke and Han (2012) distinguished between three main types of communities of learners as a pedagogical tool. Communities of learners can foster harmonious relations within classrooms and schools. Having a sense of community in the classroom can make students feel safer and better about themselves, the teacher, the other students and about school in general (emotional engagement). It has also been suggested that communities of learners facilitate effective learning. The specific instructional design in some learning communities, such as the jigsaw method (Brown & Campione, 1996), appears to promote engagement in academic disciplines and thereby students' academic achievements (cognitive engagement). Finally, communities of learners can help to establish

multi-method classroom routines that enhance the level of attention paid (behavioural engagement).

From a sociocultural perspective, a community of learners ideally appeals to engagement in all three dimensions (Volman & Ten Dam, 2015). Within this approach, learning is not a goal in itself but rather a means for participating more competently in the activities of social practices. A social practice encompasses multiple human activities in which people strive for a collective goal to meet certain needs. Each activity is directed towards an object (cf. Leontev, 1978). The social practice of medicine, for example, encompasses activities like surgery and pharmacy with, in the case of surgery, the human body as the object of the activity. The object of an activity gives rise to an object motive that urges people to engage in the activity. Surgeons will work on a patient's body—be engaged in their work—because they want to improve the health of the patient. While participating in an activity, people acquire knowledge and skills and simultaneously change the way they relate to the object of the activity. In fact, their learning brings about a transformation in the way they interpret the world and their position in it. During this process, their identities develop as well. Learning to participate is thus a cognitive, behavioural and emotional process (cf. Damasio, 2010; Levykh, 2008). Based on this sociocultural perspective, communities of learners should aim to introduce students to activities that are important in society and encourage them to discern the object motives that professionals have to engage in these activities, thereby enhancing engagement in school learning in all three dimensions.

In the social practice of traditional education, teachers teach subject lessons, and students learn subject content. As such, teaching and learning activities, unlike other activities, do not meet a direct need. School learning has largely become an activity in and of itself, with only distant reference to the outside world (e.g. 'Learning is good for my future'). As a result, the relationship between the elements of the curriculum and the exigencies of social practices remain opaque to students (Roth & Lee, 2006). In education, both the abstract concepts and the problems on which students work are often derived from disciplinary sources. Thus, curriculum content is often not connected to students' personal lives and questions, which relate to actual social practices rather than disciplinary ones. Consequently, the traditional curriculum makes students feel that they are just learning 'for school'.

In sociocultural theories, engagement is seen as the result of the interaction between an individual and the activities in which he or she participates (Hedegaard, Edwards, & Fleer, 2012; McInerney et al., 2011). The object of an activity gives rise to an object motive for people to work on the object i.e. engage in the activity. However, participation in activities is also directed by people's personal motives. A surgeon who wants to become the best surgeon in the hospital might work with even more precision than any other surgeon. It is therefore important to consider the fact that students bring to school personal motives related to their everyday activities outside school. Most important in this respect is how students see themselves as possible and actual participants in social practices, including educational practice. Students' personal motives always mediate their engagement in the curriculum. Students with technical hobbies who consider themselves to be betas will more likely be engaged in physics, for example, than students who have never engaged in technical activities and assume they lack beta skills. Therefore, a successful curriculum depends on achieving an adequate alignment between the object motives

that students associate with the teaching-learning activities and the personal motives of students as participants in other activities.

This implies that for the design of educational curricula, the interplay between types of engagement (with school, social practices and personal matters) should be taken into account. Educational curricula should relate the object of the teaching-learning activities conducted in school to the students' participation in activities outside school. Additionally, the curricula should connect to the personal motives of students as participants in these activities. Learning can then be understood as a continuing process of interpreting experiences in light of one's past, present and imagined future. Through this process, students acquire and make sense of knowledge and skills and develop motives and ideas about themselves, including their motives for actively participating in educational and other social practices or not.

1.2 Boundary experiences in pre-vocational education

One crucial aim of pre-vocational education is to encourage students to orient themselves towards certain vocations. In line with the theoretical notions outlined above, it seems plausible to foster communities of learners that aim to introduce students to professional activities. In these communities of learners, students are challenged to discern the object motives that professionals in general attach to these activities. They are thus stimulated to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the vocational practice and, along the way, develop their identities, including their personal motives.

Organising teaching and learning around a vocational practice, however, does not relate to already existing personal motives of students as a matter of course. Although students enrolled in pre-vocational education may have chosen one of the four vocational sectors (Engineering & Technology, Care & Welfare, Business or Agriculture), many of them do not already identify with the occupations within their chosen sector, whereas others may be interested in only one of the possible occupations within the sector e.g. the occupation of health care assistant within the Care & Welfare sector and not facility management assistant. In other words, only a few students will want to participate in the specific vocational practice around which teaching and learning in a community of learners is organised. It is up to the teachers to challenge all the students and broaden their horizons. In addition, students and teachers are often stuck in traditional roles at school, in which students are rather passive and leave the responsibility for their learning up to the teachers. A curriculum unit that aims to foster a community of learners should therefore also create conditions that urge students to take on a more autonomous, active role in learning.

One way to broaden students' worldview and to break through the traditional student role is to establish conditions in school for the emergence and processing of boundary experiences (Wardekker, Boersma, Ten Dam, & Volman, 2012), dialogical provocations (Matusov et al., 2012) or ruptures (Zittoun, 2008). All three concepts refer to tensions between the students' lives and the targeted social practices. In the case of pre-vocational education, the concepts refer to tensions between the students' personal lives, school practice and the vocational practices to

which they are being introduced. Boundary experiences occur when a student 'encounters a situation in which she is unable to function adequately, because she cannot fully identify with the new situation and its exigencies' (Meijers & Wardekker, 2003, p. 158). Such experiences often evoke emotions like uncertainty, which can lead to students withdrawing from learning if they do not expect to be able to remedy the situation. However, environments that allow students to manage their emotions creatively and productively serve the purpose of stimulating them to learn and revise their motives and self-concepts.

1.2 The present study

The central research question of the present study is as follows: *How can boundary experiences be evoked and used in a community of learners for vocational orientation to enhance student engagement in learning?* In light of the theory above, a community of learners for vocational orientation can be described as a pedagogical space that addresses both the personal motives of the students and the object motives associated with vocational activities by allowing students to encounter and overcome boundary experiences.

In the ideal learning community, students work cooperatively with each other, the teachers and vocational professionals on an activity related to a particular vocational practice. The students are encouraged to work on the object of the vocational activity as if they were employees at an institution or a company and are thereby introduced to the object motive that professionals in general attach to the activity. In a vocational practice with which they are unfamiliar, students may encounter boundary experiences—experiences they cannot yet understand or handle but nevertheless must address. The emotional reactions engendered by these situations lay the foundation for the students to develop the personal motive to learn to participate in the vocational activity.

A community of learners ideally offers the students sufficient support and challenges to enable and encourage them to overcome the distress of boundary experiences. Students, teachers and vocational professionals interact and share knowledge by discussing and working on the object of the vocational activity. The subject content (i.e. the material and mental 'instruments' of the vocational community) helps students understand the vocational context and the actions needed in that context. Students are also given the responsibility to take on the role of autonomous, active learners. At the same time, students are valued for their contributions to the vocational activity as if they were junior professionals. In this way, the community of learners guides and supports the students in the development of their competencies and identities as a way to overcome these boundary experiences.

In addition, a learning community for vocational orientation ideally offers students the opportunity to distance themselves from the immediate exigencies of the work situation. Students can, for example, step out of a difficult situation and take the time to think over an appropriate way to approach it. This room for reflection enables students to explore how they are functioning and developing as early professionals or what it would mean to them to be professionals in that particular sphere of work. A community of learners thus not only gives students the

space and time to acquire and reflect on the subject content that they need to learn in order to participate in vocational activities but also enables them to explore and develop their personal motives behind engaging in certain vocational practices both in the present and in the future.

2. METHODS

In a two-year research project involving a Dutch secondary school offering pre-vocational education, we developed a curriculum unit designed to foster communities of learners for vocational orientation.

2.1 The MADD unit

The designed unit, named ‘Make A Difference Day’ (MADD), after National Volunteer Day, focused on vocational orientation. The students were stimulated to 1) develop a conception of a client group in the Care & Welfare domain, 2) learn to work according to an action plan and 3) explore how they personally relate to the vocational practice they were introduced to. The unit took four full days (approximately 40 lesson hours). On the first day, the students formed teams of four to six students and chose a volunteer activity from several activities proposed by Care & Welfare institutions, such as preparing lunch for lonely people in a community centre, organising activities for people with dementia or organising a sporting event for school children. The teachers aided in the preparations through consulting hours, assignments (i.e. an essay about the institution and client group, a pre-visit to the institution, an action plan and a presentation) and non-compulsory workshops. The student teams participated in the vocational activity on-site at the institutions in cooperation with the professionals at the institute. Afterwards, they evaluated their experiences with one of the professionals. The unit ended with a presentation evening that the students organised for their classmates and parents to discuss their experiences and the learning outcomes they realised during the unit.

2.2 Participants

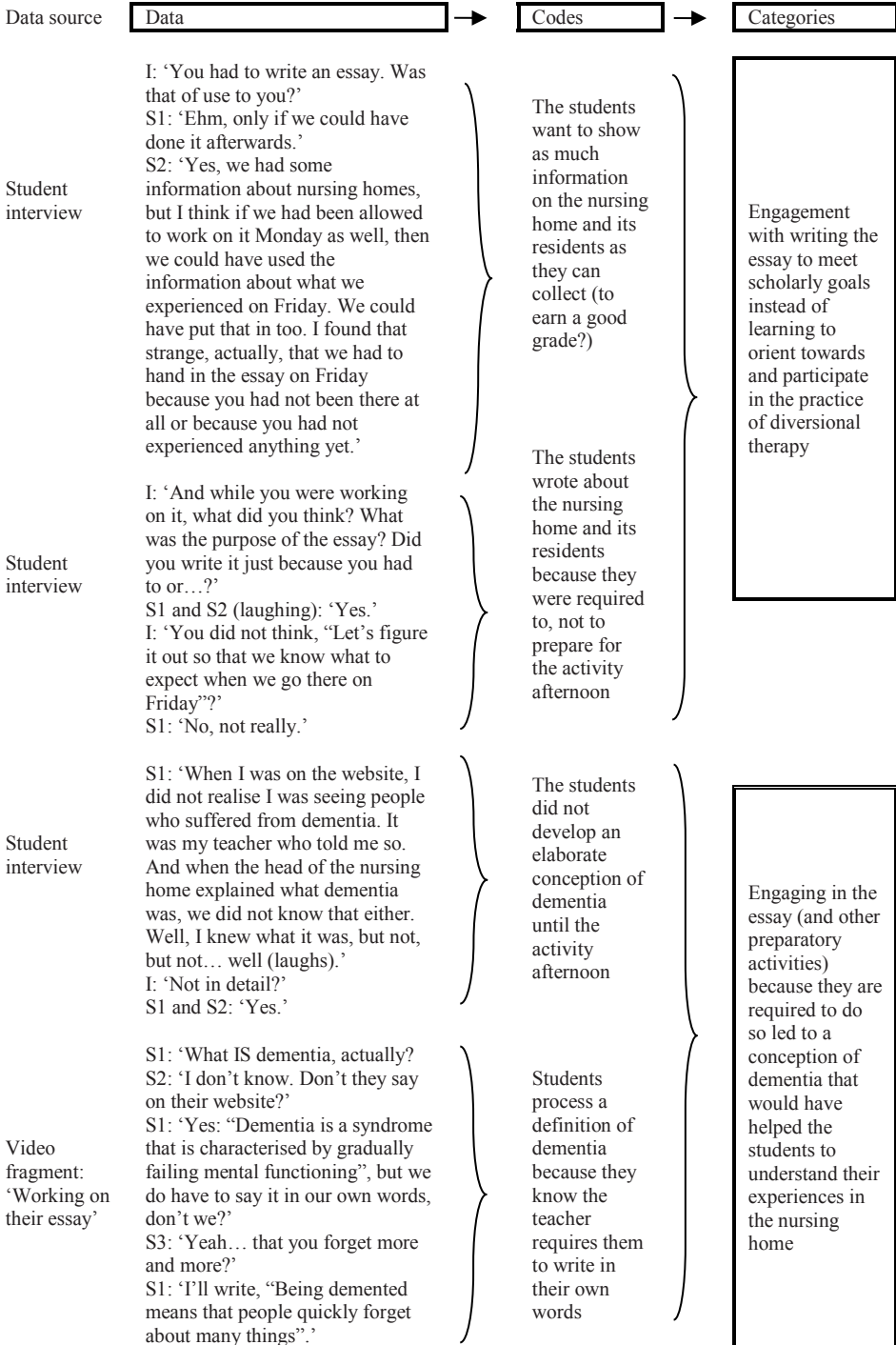
The MADD unit was led by one Care & Welfare teacher. Two other teachers and a teaching assistant contributed by conducting workshops and offering practical help. One ninth-grade class of 26 students, aged 14 to 15 years, participated in the unit. Within the class, a team of four students was selected for observation in depth. The teacher considered the students of this team to be representative of their classmates and willing and able to talk about their experiences of the MADD unit. The small group worked at school and in a nursing home for people suffering from dementia. In the nursing home, they assisted diversional therapists during an afternoon of activities for residents organised around the theme of ‘autumn’. Two students from the group were selected for an interview about their individual engagement with the MADD unit. These students differed in their personal motives for choosing the nursing home volunteer activity and were therefore expected to provide a broad picture of student engagement in learning as part of a community of learners for vocational orientation.

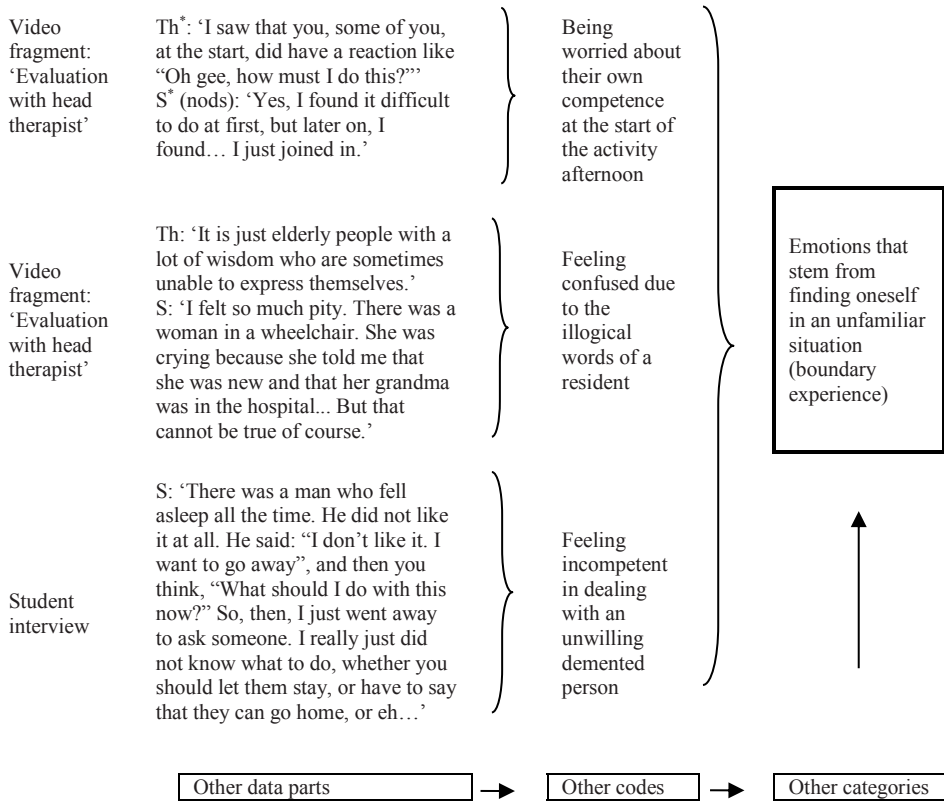
2.3 Data collection

In order to collect data on student engagement in a community of learners for vocational orientation, we video recorded the class activities, and the small group of students in particular, throughout the activities of the MADD unit. From the video recordings, we, in collaboration with the teachers, selected examples in which the students had worked as a community of learners. These were used as stimuli in stimulated recall interviews with two students of the group in order to help them recall their experiences and thus enhance the validity of the data (Calderhead, 1981). For each part of the unit, the students were asked about their perceptions of the teaching-learning activity and their engagement in learning related to that activity. We focused on the behavioural dimension (e.g. 'Did that part influence the effort you made during the unit and, if so, how and why?'), the emotional dimension (e.g. 'Did you appreciate learning and working as a community of learners during that part of the unit and, if so, why?') and the cognitive dimension (e.g. 'Did you find the Care & Welfare content useful for your life now and for your future life? Why?') of the engagement. The interviews were conducted the day after the MADD unit's activities and were audio taped and transcribed. We also collected all student products and assessments completed during the MADD unit (e.g. their essays on the institution and client group, their action plans for volunteer activities and their presentations). This enabled us to investigate whether the students' engagement was related to their learning.

2.4 Analytical procedures

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) was used to develop a theoretical understanding of the role of a community of learners for vocational orientation in engaging students in learning. The concept of boundary experiences was used to deepen our understanding and provide a starting point for building our analysis ('sensitising concept'). We selected three cases exploring the potential of the community of learners to enhance student engagement in learning. The cases concerned 1) developing a conception of a client group in the Care & Welfare domain, 2) learning to work according to an action plan and 3) exploring how students personally relate to the vocational practice to which they were introduced. We selected all the data associated with the first case—video fragments, transcripts of the student interviews and all student products and assessments completed during the MADD unit. Then we utilised open coding to break down the data into smaller parts (Figure 1). As a next step, we performed the same procedure with the data regarding the second and third cases in order to find additional codes. We then compared the three coded datasets and placed the codes into categories. Subsequently, we grouped the categorised data and looked for emerging patterns. Finally, we compared these patterns with the literature in order to arrive at an integrated theory.





* Th: Therapist, S: Student, T: Teacher, I: Interviewer

Figure 1. The process of data analysis from codes to categories

3. RESULTS

In this section, we describe whether and how the selected small group, consisting of students Fien, Laura, Maya and Jeanne⁵, became engaged in learning the subject content as a means of preparing for, accomplishing and evaluating their volunteer activity during the MADD unit—an activity afternoon for people with dementia in a nearby broadening home.

3.1 Developing a conception of the client group

The client group for Fien, Laura, Maya and Jeanne consisted of elderly people with dementia. The following four events demonstrate the development of the students'

⁵ For privacy reasons, the names of the students have been changed.

conception of their client group: 1) initial conception, 2) workshop, 3) activity afternoon and 4) presentation evening.

Initial conception. The students had met elderly people before but never people suffering from dementia. According to the teachers, the students' notion of elderly people was quite negative and limited (the students even described them as 'fossils'). The students' initial conception of people with dementia became clear through their essays about the nursing home and its residents. Driven by the teachers' requirement to translate difficult terms into their own words, the students defined dementia as a condition in which 'people quickly forget many things'. The essay was meant to help the students prepare for working with the elderly people and was supposed to be handed in before the activity afternoon at the nursing home. The students, however, complained that this deadline undermined their goal of collecting as much information on the nursing home and its residents as possible.

Workshop. The students chose to attend the workshop called 'Interacting with Your Client Group'. The workshops were designed to bridge the gap between the theory in the curriculum and work practice at the institution. The teacher and students discussed how professional manners, such as imagining being old, disabled or sick, could help the students understand and thus better interact with their client group. When Maya mentioned that she used to be scared of the people in her grandfather's nursing home, the teacher confirmed that people suffering from dementia may sometimes say strange things and added that these things generally have nothing to do with the bystanders. The students then imagined how the demented people in 'their' nursing home would respond to them, building on one another's increasingly alarming images. Led by the teacher, the students thereby began to elaborate on their images of demented people.

Activity afternoon. During the activity afternoon, the students assisted the diversional therapists in autumn-related activities with the residents, such as stringing peanuts and arranging autumn leaves. In one instance, Maya stood next to a resident who was crying because, according to her, her grandmother was in the hospital. Maya responded empathetically at first, but then her face expressed confusion, and she became quiet. During the evaluation with the head therapist, Maya mentioned this resident and reported feeling pity for her because she cried about something that could not be true. The head therapist explained that this resident had 'gone back' because she had lost her short-term memory. The students nodded, and their faces expressed empathy.

Presentation evening. During the presentation evening, the team described the nursing home, its residents, their volunteer activity and their experiences. The students alternated, quite stiffly, in presenting each part. However, during the section called 'What Did We Think Of It?', the students enthusiastically shared their impressions of the demented people in the nursing home, interrupting and building on each other's accounts. Jeanne: 'They kept on asking the same things'. Fien: 'There was this man; he was either singing or sleeping, but...'. Jeanne: 'That man was singing because he used to be part of a choir in the past', referring to the fact that in his reality the man was still in a choir.

To recapitulate. As per our interpretation, the students attached the following object motive to writing the essay: to show the teacher that they had found and processed as much information on the nursing home and its residents as possible. This explains that the students were satisfied with a superficial definition of

dementia instead of a definition that would be helpful during the afternoon in the nursing home (i.e. the object motive that the students were intended to attach to the teaching-learning activity).

During the workshop, however, the students set aside their traditional student roles the moment the teacher led the students to imagine themselves in the nursing home, performing their volunteer activity. It was then that they crossed the border from the school into the nursing home in their imagination, resulting in several emotions: the students seemed to be distressed because they believed that they would not be able to manage interacting with the residents. During the activity afternoon, Maya crossed the border from the school to the nursing home again when she realised that the crying resident's grandmother could not possibly be in the hospital.

In our view, the students came to understand the situations they had imagined and encountered with the help of the knowledge about dementia that they had gained while working on their essay, which was repeated, supplemented and used by the teacher, head therapist and the students themselves in the context of their experiences during the activity afternoon. Their conception of elderly people suffering from dementia developed from a definition that made little sense to the students at the start of the unit to a deeper understanding of dementia and the people who suffer from the disease, as expressed during the presentation evening at the end of the unit.

3.2 Learning to work according to an action plan

Fien, Laura, Maya and Jeanne had to (learn to) develop an action plan for a diversional therapy activity. We discuss four events aimed at this learning goal: 1) initial conception, 2) pre-visit, 3) consultation hour and 4) final plan.

Initial conception. Diversional therapists use action plans to organise activities for their client groups. Therefore, the students were given a format for making such an action plan. The students, however, did not read the explanation of the teaching-learning activity. Instead of an action plan for activities around the theme of autumn that they could do with the elderly, the students made a log of their own actions during the teaching-learning activity.

Pre-visit. The four students were supposed to pay a visit to the nursing home and discuss their action plan with the diversional therapists. However, when the students called the nursing home to arrange the pre-visit, to their disappointment, they were informed that they could not meet with the therapists before the volunteer day. During the workshop called 'The Visit' aimed to help them prepare for the visit to their Care & Welfare institution, the students showed disengagement; they slumped around their tables and sighed deeply. The teacher urged them to work on the action plan for their volunteer activity by advising them to make arrangements by phone and suggesting that they think about how to organise autumn-related activities that could be done in the nursing home. When the teacher tried to elicit an image of them at the volunteer day in the nursing home with no plan, the students finally began to work but only reluctantly and perfunctorily. The opportunity to prepare and lead a diversional activity of their own had passed. They were convinced that they would do well under the direction of the diversional therapist.

Consultation hour. During a consultation hour, the students asked a teacher to check their 'action plan'. The teacher explained the difference between a log and an action plan and, like the workshop teacher, urged the students to make a pretend action plan. The students made a list of autumn-related activities without much detail (when, what, how many residents, who would lead the activities etc.). The teacher was therefore still not satisfied with the plan. After many objections, the students agreed to complete the action plan as explained by the teacher but only because it was required.

Final plan. The students' final plan of action described four ideas for autumn-related activities, lacked any detail and was not useable. When the head therapist wanted to discuss the students' action plan during the evaluation, the students hastened to note that it was 'just a pretend action plan'. Fien explained that they had to make the plan, even though they did not understand how their ideas for autumn-related activities would contribute to the afternoon.

To recapitulate. The students had obviously perceived the teaching-learning activity as something they were required to do, just like any other school assignment. They did not discern the object motive that the teacher expected them to attach to the teaching-learning activity, namely, thinking about the organisation of a diversional therapy activity for the afternoon at the nursing home.

During the workshop, the teacher attempted to evoke a boundary experience by encouraging the students to imagine themselves at the activity afternoon at the nursing home completely unprepared i.e. to cross the border from school to a vocational situation in their imagination. In our view, the students did not perceive such a situation as being likely and did not cross the border even in their imaginations. Thus, they did not experience any distress or other emotions. Therefore, there was no need for the students to engage in acquiring knowledge and tools as per the action plan format. As a result, the second learning goal of the unit was not achieved.

3.3 Orienting towards vocations

During the MADD unit's activities, Fien, Laura, Maya and Jeanne were encouraged to reflect on the nature of diversional therapy for people suffering from dementia, as well as their personal relationships to that practice. We describe the following events: 1) choosing a volunteer activity, 2) preparatory activities, 3) activity afternoon, 4) presentation evening and 5) interview. We focused on Fien and Laura who differed in their approaches during the MADD unit regarding vocational orientation.

Choosing a volunteer activity. After a quick introduction to the MADD unit, the students were invited to form small groups and choose a vocational activity to organise and actually accomplish during the national day of voluntary work. The teacher explicitly encouraged the students to choose smart i.e. to choose an activity that would help them clarify their plans for their future work life. Fien reported she was convinced that she would work with children in the future. She chose the volunteer activity in the nursing home for demented people in order to compare working with elderly people with working with children. Laura, by contrast, joined

the nursing home group because she wanted to be with her friend Jeanne. The idea of actually working with elderly people initially did not appeal to either of them.

Preparatory activities. Fien put a lot of effort in the teaching-learning activity of writing the essay. However, she abandoned her efforts when the students discovered they could not meet the diversional therapists before the volunteer day. Laura, on the other hand, displayed marginal investment from the start. Laura used her computer to chat with friends and slipped away to the auditorium to meet them. The teachers noticed this but, unlike regular lessons, they continually attempted to pass the responsibility for doing well at the institution over to the students. The students were initially confused. Soon, however, they began to appreciate the liberty they were given to prepare for their volunteer activity in a way they deemed appropriate. During 'The Visit' workshop, both Fien and Laura showed little engagement. Only when Jeanne proposed baking cookies for the elderly people to create a cosy atmosphere did Fien and Laura show some enthusiasm.

Activity afternoon. When the students arrived at the institution, they initially appeared overwhelmed. However, they relaxed when they were calmly introduced by the therapists as young colleagues, and the elderly people spontaneously began to talk to them. The therapists and volunteers involved the students in each autumn-related activity by letting them observe and participate. The professionals also demonstrated the pleasure they derived from their work. As the students did well, the therapists allowed the students to lead the activities if they wanted. Thus, the students had the opportunity to observe and cooperate with experienced diversional therapists in working with the residents. Over the course of the day, they began to realise the importance of caring for the residents. During the interview, Fien said, 'There was a man who wanted coffee but went away repeatedly, came back and then took another cup of coffee until he had five cups of coffee in front of him. That was pitiful, and then you realise that he is in need of care.'

Presentation evening. During the presentation evening, the students were asked to present what they had learnt about working with demented people as diversional therapists. Fien and Laura were positive about the presentation evening. Fien: 'I think people like to hear that... that you did not know at first and now you do, that you just learnt a lot.' After presenting some information from their essay, the students shared their nursing home experiences with the audience. Laura: 'I liked it. The people were so happy and knew something about everything.' Both Laura and Fien acknowledged that it was nice to see the elderly being grateful and enjoying everything they did.

Interview. When prompted by the researcher during the interview, the students reflected on what it would mean to them to be professionals in that particular work sphere. Fien: 'I expected it to be boring [...] just sitting and drinking a cup of tea, and that's it, but it was quite different. The people are very nice. They forget a lot of things, but that's just sweet. You can help the people in your own way, and they let you help them that way. I like that too.' Both students, however, did not develop an affinity for such work. Fien: 'I think diversional therapy would suit me, but still, I would not do anything with it.'

To recapitulate. At the start of the unit, Fien's personal motive to compare working with elderly people with working with children optimally matched the object motive that the teacher intended the students to attach to the MADD unit (i.e. to explore a vocational practice). Fien was willing to engage in the teaching-learning

activities as a means of orienting herself and organising diversional activities at the nursing home. Her engagement in learning diminished the moment it became clear that the students could not contribute to the activity afternoon ‘for real’. As per our interpretation, she could no longer pursue her personal motive because the opportunity to participate in providing diversional therapy was gone. Laura, on the other hand, did not have any personal motives aligned with the intended object motives of the teaching-learning activities. The goal of the MADD unit—to help students explore a vocational practice—did not coincide with Laura’s learning needs, so she found a motive in the activity that differed from what the school intended: having fun with her friends. We interpret her lack of effort in writing the essay and other teaching-learning activities to be a result of this mismatch between her personal and object motives.

The teachers showed trust in the students as autonomous, active learners. This helped the students quickly overcome the boundary experiences. At first, the students could not fully identify with school as a place where they could decide on how to do what and when, which created confusion. However, they soon used the liberty they were given to prepare for their volunteer activity in their own way—by baking cookies. The students’ engagement in this ‘preparatory activity’ can be explained by the fact that the students again changed the intended object motive of the MADD unit—orienting themselves towards a vocational practice—to one that aligned with their personal motive of having fun with one another.

Joining the therapists in working with the residents made the students aware of the object motives of therapists behind providing care for the elderly. Nevertheless, they did not seem to recognise the more specific object motive associated with diversional therapy—activating demented people. This may be explained by the fact that the students did not encounter a boundary experience, as they could not contribute to the activity afternoon by organising and leading a diversional activity of their own.

The students approached the presentation evening as if it were an academic assignment, just like the teaching-learning activities of writing an essay and developing an action plan. They did not take up the object motive of involving their classmates and parents in their vocational orientation, which was what the teacher had hoped they would do. Instead, they just presented the information they had gathered for their essay and their experiences at the nursing home i.e. presented them without reference to how the information and experiences deepened their view of working with the elderly as a vocational practice in which they would or would not want to engage.

Although the activity afternoon was exciting for the students and helped them to broaden their views on the elderly and on working as a diversional therapist, it does not seem to have led them to develop a clear view of the object motive that professionals in general have when engaging in diversional therapy. They had only partly developed an orientation towards working as a diversional therapist in a nursing home.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, we examined a curriculum unit—dubbed the ‘MADD unit’—that was designed to foster communities of learners for vocational orientation. We argued that a community of learners for vocational orientation as a pedagogical space has the potential to address both the personal motives of students and the object motives that professionals in general attach to vocational activities by allowing students to encounter and overcome boundary experiences.

We found the following emergent pattern: During an activity afternoon in a nursing home, students were encouraged to literally cross the border between school and work. Supported by teachers, professional diversional therapists and one another, they participated in a volunteer activity at a Care & Welfare institution. This led to situations in which the students were not yet able to function adequately. When the students encountered such a boundary experience, they showed engagement in learning the subject content as a means to understand and act in the vocational situation that evoked the boundary experience. Vocational knowledge, tools and support were provided and discussed in the learning community. The object motive of teaching-learning activities that is central in traditional schooling, i.e. merely ‘learning’, was replaced by the object motive of a vocational activity. In this way, the students were tempted to lay down their traditional student role and take up a more autonomous, active role both as learners and as if they were fledgling professionals.

During the preparatory activities, the students were encouraged to cross the border between school and work in their imaginations. For evoking boundary experiences, however, they had to be convinced that the border crossing would also take place in reality. During the preparatory activities of the MADD unit, the students showed engagement in learning if the border crossing would take place later in reality, but stuck with their traditional students’ roles if they believed they would not encounter a real situation that would be hard to handle i.e. would not cross the border in reality.

This emergent pattern can be related to literature on transitions. Hviid & Zittoun (2008, p. 123) describe transitions as ‘processes of catalysed change due to a rupture, and aiming at a new sustainable fit between the person and her current environment’. They discuss transitions as having an individual and social nature. Hviid and Zittoun point at the importance of teachers being positive and supportive in response to students who are engaged in transactional processes like the development of new skills or self-definition. They argue for ‘spaces for try-and-fail, for experimenting as-if, or for enabling a ludic appropriation of knowledge, skills and identities’ (p. 125). Such a space is needed for students to disengage from old methods of conduct and ways of thinking, or from old self-concepts, and move towards a new form of acting, ways of thinking or sense-making. Our study shows that a community of learners may function exactly as the pedagogical space Hviid and Zittoun argued for.

Our study also shows that students with different personal motives relate differently to vocational activities and have different object motives behind choosing to engage in these activities or not (cf. Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). It appeared that the student who did not aim to orient herself towards the vocational practice at stake hardly encountered the boundary experiences that might have helped her to align

with the object motive that the students were expected to attach to the practice. The liberty provided by the community of learners to pursue personal goals instigated the student to change the object of the teaching-learning activities and relate it to her personal motives—having fun with her friends. However, for the other student, the boundary experiences induced by the teaching-learning context appeared not to be focused enough to develop her personal motives towards the vocational practice of a diversional therapist.

The alignment between the intentions of the school and the students' motives requires specific attention, even in communities of learners. However, teachers do not necessarily need to take students' existing motives as a given. They are shaped through the students' previous experiences and wishes related to social practices. Students play an autonomous, active role in their own education (see also, Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Volman & Ten Dam, 2007), but teachers can influence that role; learning implies changes in engagement. At the beginning of the curriculum unit, none of the students considered working with elderly people to be a desirable professional future. As such, none of them wanted to learn to participate more competently in caring for the elderly. Nevertheless, by working as a community of learners for vocational orientation, the teachers were able to create opportunities for boundary experiences and to enhance the students' engagement in learning. Thus, the students developed their own positions, roles and competencies in working with the elderly in general. Their negative views of working with the elderly were replaced with positive views, such as the satisfaction of working with sociable and grateful people, regardless of whether the work aligned with their future work plans. An awareness of these aspects may be the starting point for the further exploration of the students' learning and engagement.

We based our theoretical understanding of student engagement in a community of learners for vocational orientation on data collected from a small group of four students. We therefore do not aim to generalise the findings of our analysis. We do think, however, that our analysis revealed interesting insights that may direct future research on student engagement in communities of learners in general. In our small-scale study, organising teaching and learning as a community of learners proved to be a promising approach for enhancing students' engagement in learning. Boundary experiences that are deliberately evoked are likely to result in the development of knowledge and tools as well as a broader view of possible future vocations.