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# Student-teacher conferencing in Swedish upper secondary school: Dimensions of dominance and relations between perspectives in institutional discourse

Robert Ohlsson

Department of Education, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Student-teacher conferences are mandatory in Swedish upper secondary school. Steering documents prescribe that these conversations should be characterised by equality between the interlocutors and “dialogue” is presented as an ideal for these interactions. This is a challenging task since this institutional discourse actualises the formal roles of student and teacher, and the interlocutors' relationship is inherently asymmetrical. This paper presents findings from an empirical study of audiotaped student-teacher conferences. By drawing on the concepts of perspectivisation and dominance the findings highlight ways that perspectives are related to each other in the conferences. The results show that the teachers' interactional role in the conversations was characterised by interactional dominance, while forms that had been filled out in preparation were used as tools that mediated student-teacher interaction and dominated the conferences semantically. Results pertaining to dominance and perspectivisation are further presented in terms of: perspective elicitation in the conversations; validation of the student perspective; playing down of asymmetry; and the ways that verticality between perspectives is established. It is concluded that when using guidelines involving self-assessment in a routine way as an agenda, the conferences acquires an educational and formative character rather than the open exploratory character prescribed in policy documents.

## 1. Introduction

In 2000, student-teacher conferences called *utvecklingssamtal* (development conversations) became mandatory in Swedish upper secondary schools. The upper secondary school Ordinance prescribed that these conferences should provide students with comprehensive information about their development in school. Since neither the ordinance, nor the curriculum at the time (valid 1994–2011), regulated in detail how these conferences should be carried out, the schools could formulate their own goals and guidelines. However, the conferences in upper secondary school follow the conferences of compulsory school, which have been characterised as ‘dialogues’ by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The steering document clarifies that the focus of these conversations should not be a delivery of information by the teacher, but that the relations should be equal and reciprocal, and that it is important that students are given the opportunity to express their views (SNAE, 1995, 2001, 2009). But, according to the annual report from the school inspection of 2003–2004, this seems to be a difficult ambition to realise. The report states that, in far too many schools, there is “a lack of knowledge regarding the content and function of the conferences” (SNAE, 2005, p.138; my translation) and students reportedly criticised the conferences as being dominated by the teachers' delivery of information rather than by “mutual

E-mail address: [robert.ohlsson@edu.su.se](mailto:robert.ohlsson@edu.su.se).

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dialogue and future-oriented discussions” (ibid, p.130; my translation).

Even though the student-teacher conferences in upper secondary school are less regulated in comparison with compulsory school conferencing, expectations regarding what should be accomplished in them, and how these should be carried out, are expressed in local guidelines. This paper will present findings from an empirical study of student-teacher conversations in upper secondary school, in order to examine the local guidelines that apply, to explore ‘dialogic’ properties of the encounters, and to unfold some of the asymmetric features that make the realisation of equality between the interlocutors problematic.<sup>1</sup> Asymmetry is a pervasive and complex phenomenon in interaction, and it can be conceptualised and investigated in a number of ways. For example, in conversation analysis (CA), it is addressed in terms of knowledge manifestation in conversation, turn-taking and formats in talk (e.g., Ten Have, 1991). The following analysis will draw on the concepts of *dominance* and *verticality* in order to unfold some important aspects of asymmetry in the conversations. In addition, the perspectives of the interlocutors, and the ways that these are made relevant and are related to each other, will be examined to illuminate important features of symmetric and asymmetric relations in institutional discourse, where dialogue is presented as an ideal and expectation.

## 2. Previous studies

That fact that student-teacher conferencing can be a challenging task is highlighted by a number of Swedish studies at elementary school level, where attention is given to several problems in regard to the realisation of the ambitions and ideals that exist. Hofvendahl (2006b) maintains that these conversations often are characterised by a retrospective focus on deficiencies, rather than a prospective focus on development and success. Others emphasise how they are often experienced by the students as a situation of assessment rather than guidance (Tholander & Norrby, 2008). It has also been shown that the students’ influence on the conversations is very limited. Both Adelswärd, Evaldsson, and Reimers (1997) and Hofvendahl (2006a) describe how the students’ active participation is restricted; they are the topic of discussions but have a subordinate and passive role in the interaction, which is dominated by the teachers (cf. MacLure & Walker, 2000) for similar patterns of interaction in UK secondary school conferencing). Bergqvist (2010) also describes the conferences as asymmetric and very much like ordinary classroom communication “in the sense that the teacher started and ended the activity, introduced topics and asked questions” (Bergqvist, 2010, p.140):

The teacher (and the forms) posed the questions while the students responded. The activity and the tools used did not generate genuine commitment and dialogue and there is little evidence of students’ initiative and self-reflection. The conversations rather mirror traditional patterns of institutional interaction and control. (Bergqvist, 2010, p.147).

The role of proforma, written forms and questionnaires in the developmental dialogues are also highlighted in other studies. Since these conversations are often preceded by prepared topics and questions, and the filling in of forms for self-evaluation is sometimes part of the conferencing, such documents contribute to the structure and content of the conversation. Tanner & Pérez Prieto highlight how this may be an important factor when they observe how, “filling in the form appropriately takes precedence over the opportunity to explore student initiatives about the school situation when these do not fit in given categories” (Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2014, p.564). Bergqvist (2010) similarly regards the forms as “technological devices” that stage the conversations as a questioning procedure, where the teachers read aloud from the forms. In a similar vein, Markström describes the form as an important artefact that has an impact on what conferences “ought to be concerned with and how the conference should be constructed and conducted” (Markström, 2011, p.466).

The shift to conferences led by the students rather than the teachers – which are practiced in many schools to mitigate asymmetries by encouraging the active participation of the student – does not seem to change this. Even though the students are assigned responsibility for the conferences by leading them, asymmetries seem to prevail, partly because of how the encounters are framed by documents; Tholander claims that the proforma used might have “clear, but counteracting, implications for students’ active participation during the conferences” (Tholander, 2011, p.247). In his study of student-led conferencing in the sixth grade, he observed how student participation was restricted to reading aloud from their prepared documents and awaiting comments from the teachers and parents. In addition, Tholander concludes that, besides controlling the proforma, the teacher also governed the conferences in a number of ways: “(i) the teacher alone decided the seriousness of various problems, (ii) the teacher often manoeuvred the students towards certain desirable answers and opinions and (iii) the teacher almost always had the last word” (ibid, pp. 247–248).

Previous studies of student-teacher conferencing mainly focus the praxis in primary schools. In upper secondary schools, however, the conditions are different in several ways: the students are older and are assumed to be able to partake in the conversations in other ways; they have also accumulated considerable experiences of participating in developmental conferences through their previous schooling; and new issues concerning their learning and school situation are relevant for the student and teacher to discuss. This study aims to complement previous findings concerning student-teacher conferencing as a communicative genre, and further the understanding of conditions for perspectivisation in this kind of institutional discourse.

## 3. Asymmetries and perspectivisation in institutional discourse

The social activity of student-teacher conferencing can be regarded as an example of *institutional encounters* or *institutional discourse* (Drew & Heritage, 1997; Linell, 1990a). It is a mandatory activity, whose purposes are specified in national and local policies

<sup>1</sup> Results from this study have previously been published in Ohlsson (2012).

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