

Exploring the contexts of information designed for Swedish school-leavers

Frances Hultgren
Swedish School of Library and Information Science
Göteborg University and Högskolan i Borås
<frances.hultgren@hb.se>

Abstract

In this paper the institutional origins of information designed for school leavers have been examined using a discourse analytical approach. Texts from three of the major actors in the careers guidance system constitute the empirical basis of the study. It was found that information and the individual are constituted in different ways in each of the texts. Different ways of viewing the individual and information are related to different views on the nature of society, the labour market and the individual's position within it, and on the value of education. Such views mediate to the reader which actions may be appropriate or inappropriate to take. The implications of the study are that young people need to develop skills in the critical analysis of informational texts as a tool in discerning their own best interests in relation to the range of interests promoted by career guidance literature. Furthermore, it is suggested that technical solutions need to be developed that increase the transparency of literature designed for school leavers.

Keywords : young people, career guidance, information-seeking, discourse analysis; Sweden

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contexts of study and occupational information specifically designed for school leavers and to focus particularly on the ways in which views of school leavers and study and occupational information are mediated in such literature. Arising from an interest in the information strategies of school leavers in relation to educational and occupational choice my attention turned to the information itself; that is to the vested interests that inform the literature provided by some of the major actors in the careers guidance system¹. It is assumed that information and access to it are always embedded in, or coloured by, a political or social context and therefore cannot be neutral, consequently the world views informing material provided for school leavers will also influence the extent to which the content is found useful by its readers. An exploration of the literature itself may illuminate the standpoints and contexts of the different actors in their endeavours to influence the decision-making processes of young people with information.

In a debate on the professionalisation of careers advisors the chairman of The Network for Careers Advisors in Adult Education refers to their role as “spiders in the web” drawing together threads from the different actors involved in the career guidance system (Möller, 2005). This implies that although the system is largely financed through public funds and thus seen as an instrument for implementing social policies, it may also constitute an arena where the interests of different social institutions and actors may come into conflict. In this paper I intend to look closer at the literature provided by three actors involved in the careers guidance information system: The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (CSE), The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO) and The National Agency for Higher Education. CSE is an organisation dedicated to furthering the interests of Swedish

entrepreneurs while SACO safeguards the interests of academic professionals on the labour market. The mandate of The National Agency for Higher Education is to implement government education policies which are currently informed in the main by the ideals of the Social Democratic Party.

In connection with the above, attention has recently been called to unsatisfactory levels of reading comprehension among Swedish youth, in particular with regard to non-fiction texts (Skolverket, 2004). At the same time, skills in information literacy are being promoted as a means of empowering young people to make reflective, well-informed choices concerning their futures (Ekholm & Loberg, 2001). The present study seeks to illuminate the difficulties that may be encountered in making well-informed decisions based on readings of a particular literary genre; i.e. literature made accessible through the careers guidance system.

Theoretical background

A discourse analytic viewpoint has been adopted because of its potential in exploring different pictures of the social world. In this viewpoint the researcher works from the basis that language is used to represent versions of reality through the perspectives of different actors and to articulate particular views of the social world in particular contexts. For example, Given (2002) shows how professors, by positioning students as young, inexperienced and prone to cheating thus frustrate and humiliate ambitious students through time consuming control devices aimed at curbing plagiarism. Her study reveals how discourses have practical consequences that impact not only on the *actions* of the professors but also on how mature students experience tuition. Language, through discourses, is regarded as a tool for constituting the world and its objects in ways that influence individuals' lives. This being said, I do not suggest that people are helpless in the face of any particular discourse but rather that the individual has the possibility to construct his own identity and world views out of the range of discourses that are available to her/him but also that individual actions may be restrained or delimited by the positions individuals are placed in, in a linguistic sense, by others. My interest lies in the particular discourses that are available to school leavers about themselves and about information. In this sense information, according to Talja, "is about what people do with language and what language does to people" (Talja, 1997:71). The discourses at play within the information literature directed at school leavers may thus have implications for how young people view themselves and how they view information and thus influence their information seeking and use practices.

Recent studies on information needs, seeking and use (INSU) usually focus on how people seek and use information in context, where the concept of context is often ill-defined (Case, 2002:225). In his analysis of the use of the concept Case found that context refers to the information seeker's "environment that partially determines, constrains and supports the types of needs and inquiries that arise. The seeker also has his or her own memories, predispositions, and motivations – an internal environment of influence" (ibid: 226). Attention is paid to the political, social and cultural context of the information seeker and many of the models construed within information seeking studies demonstrate this attention, e.g. Wilson, 1994; Leckie et al, 1996. In this study interest is focused on the social, political and cultural context of the formal information sources used by school leavers rather than on that of the school leavers themselves. This focus makes it difficult to relate to established INSU models as they address information seeking in the context of the seeker. In this case, the object of study lies more in how information is mediated and with the implications this has for school leavers' information seeking. However, in a model from 1985 Höglund and Persson (1985)

describe the physical access of information as the tip of an iceberg; beneath the surface lie all the factors that constrain, promote or influence actual use:

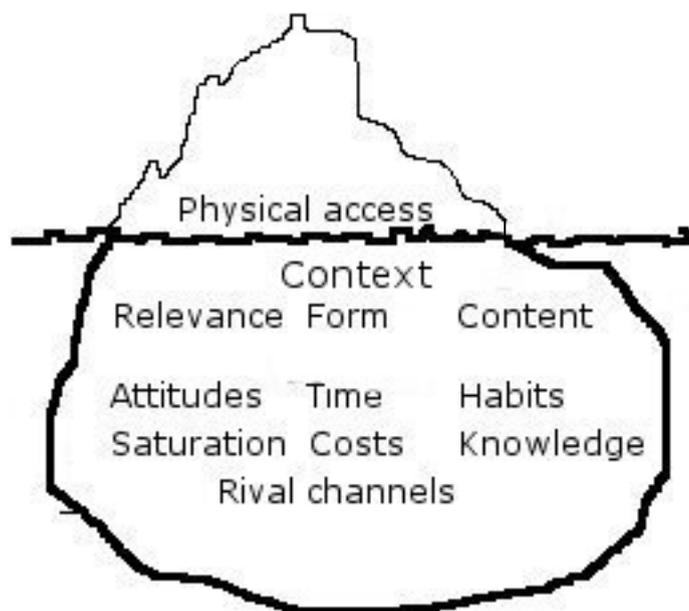


Fig. 1 The iceberg of information provision (adapted from Höglund and Persson, 1985:52)

Below the surface of physical access lie all the factors that come into play once a document is in the hands of the potential reader. In this paper particular attention will be paid to aspects of the social, political and cultural context of formal information sources for school leavers, an aspect which has been added to Höglund's and Persson's model. It is assumed that the contexts from which information is drawn colours such information with embedded values that in turn may affect both the acceptability of information as well as impacting on the uses to which information is put.

An institutional perspective on information for school leavers

Apart from the careers advisors themselves other major actors in the guidance system include the trade unions, The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (CSE), and The National Agency for Higher Education (NAHE). Each of these organisations publishes information material for school leavers; *Välja Yrke / Choose an occupation* (2003), *Äntligen 18! / 18 at last!* (2003) /and *Studenthandboken /The Student Handbook* (2002). All three publications are available in print and on the Internet. Careers advisors are members of a profession guided by ethical rules and by documented goals for their activities. An examination of the above documents in search of their perspectives on information may reveal the different institutional voices that both careers advisors and individuals hear and are influenced by in counselling or in the process of seeking information related to further studies and occupations. I aim to examine these documents with a discourse analytic approach.

The construction of information and the individual in "18 at last!"

The following extract is taken from the introduction to the book *18 at last!* published by The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and distributed by post to all school leavers in the autumn of 2003. The book is attractively designed, full of colour photographs and positively charged chapter headings. This extract is also repeated on the last page of the book:

For us, enterprising people are all those who want to do something and who do it...The difficult thing is to believe in yourself and in your idea and that's why this book has been written. Here, we interweave interviews with people that have had the courage to do their own thing and information and ways you can use to get you where you want to be...we hope the book will give you the inspiration to help yourself to all the opportunities out there in the big world outside school (18 at last! 2003: 3. My translation)

The dominant discourse of the extract is the notion of enterprise and the enterprising individual in the context of Swedish entrepreneurship. The idea of enterprise (a readiness to try new ideas) is harnessed specifically to business ideas and information is constituted as inspiration for independent young people with strong willpower and an "idea". To do your "own thing" is later used as a chapter heading subtitled "Starting your own company" (ibid:104). The enterprise discourse itself can be located in neo-liberal political philosophy which is a driving force behind CSE's endeavour to transform Swedish society to an enterprise culture:

The Confederation's mandate is to continuously heighten public and official awareness of the important value of Swedish enterprise. ... The Confederation is Sweden's leading business advocate and it aggressively promotes free enterprise in order to obtain the best business environment for all Swedish companies. At the top of the Confederation's domestic agenda are issues such as; strengthening the value and importance of enterprise, ensuring fair and open competition, liberalizing the Swedish economy and lowering taxes, creating a growing and flexible labor market (CSE, 2005).

18 at last! embodies an economic view of the world, for instance, one of the chapters in the book is entitled: "Further studies are an investment" and this is further defined as "an investment in time and money" (*18 at last!*2003:30. My translation). Even individuals can be described in economic terms; at a recent conference in Career Guidance the head of CSE's division for the provision of competence compared secondary school drop-outs to faulty cars and accused the education system of faulty production techniques (Fräjdin-Hellqvist, 2005). The implication is that it is the competences and ideas of individuals as objects of economic value that are of interest to CSE and the matching of these competences with current labour market needs.

What is gained by constituting information as inspiration for the enterprising individual is to ring in and define the target reader group – courageous young people with business ideas and entrepreneurial traits. The information seeker, thus constituted as courageous, creative and enterprising, is invited to look for inspiration that will help him/her to achieve the goals that they are assumed to have. In an institutional perspective, the book can be seen as a tool through which the interests of CSE are furthered by inviting young people to think of themselves in a way that is aligned with a neo-liberal view of the individual. DiMaggio and Powell suggest that individual preferences and the way one thinks about oneself are indeed shaped by institutional forces (1991:3). In this case, the information seeker is encouraged to adopt CSE's economic interpretation of the world as a market place and to apply it to their choice of studies and occupation. For an anxious 18-year-old reader without well-developed interests and goals the effect might be the opposite – to increase uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy and to encourage them to make instrumental choices that do not resonate with

their capacities. *18 at last!* also provides alternatives to higher education and demonstrates through interviews with successful young entrepreneurs that young people can succeed in an entrepreneurial culture without qualifications from formal education.

The enterprise discourse is not the only discourse in operation within the career guidance system and, as will be seen, several discourses operate in juxtaposition with each other.

The construction of information and the individual in “Choose an occupation”

The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO), which is an umbrella organisation for trade unions for professionals, is responsible for *Choose an Occupation* (2003). The organisation's vision is "a knowledge society for everyone, with a high level of knowledge, high welfare and great individual freedom of choice with responsibility" (*Om SACO*, 2005. My translation). Its political agenda includes action to ensure that "labour market policy is not permitted to encroach on the jurisdiction of the education system" (SACO, 2002:9). This may be contrasted with CSE's aim to "Modernise national education and training systems and adapt them to labour market realities" (CSE, 2003a:33)

The book is organised alphabetically by occupation and each description includes the length and type of education required and a prognosis of the labour market for each. The contents of the book are described in the following way:

The contents of the book build mainly on information from our associated unions, they have the absolute best knowledge of labour market opportunities for different occupations (p.1).

Further, the chairman of SACO motivates higher education in the introduction:

As it is likely that your choice of education will affect the rest of your life you should choose something you are interested in and think is fun. It is therefore important that you really feel that you have made the right choice and feel that your education will allow you to develop as a human being...It is not always easy to determine which occupation might suit you best so it may be better for you not to focus too much on an occupation but on the subjects you are interested in...I think it is important that you educate yourself for your own development, for your potential in society and so that you will have greater freedom of choice on the labour market (p 5-6).

Here several discourses are revealed. An economic discourse can be traced in the statement that the book provides information about job opportunities on the labour market suggesting that this is a significant aspect that information seekers should pay attention to: matching a line of studies with labour market predictions. At the same time a claim for SACO's expertise - "absolute best knowledge" in the area is made¹. The economic discourse is not, however, the only theme in the above statement, there is also a reference to the personal value of education as enriching and growing out of interests already developed by the individual, which resonates with a humanist world view.

¹ This may be questioned in light of the fact that, for example, the Swedish Medical Association has been active in severely restricting the recruitment of medical students which has resulted in a shortage of doctors and in forcing Swedish students to seek medical education abroad.

The idea that education contributes to personal influence in society can be traced to the discourse on the knowledge society and the knowledge economy. In *Directions for SACO 2001-2005* the organisation's goal is defined as "actively contributing to develop Sweden into a leading knowledge nation" (2001:2). Further:

People in our society should have the chance to develop into bearers of knowledge. It is only through an increased knowledge content in production – public and private – that work processes can be refined and increased in value thereby creating growth. Growth, in its turn, constitutes the basis of increased welfare through economic, social and cultural development (ibid).

In contrast to CSE's aim to promote an entrepreneurial culture in Sweden SACO has a clear objective to promote the professional interests of its members through the development of the knowledge society and formal education. Its members are academics in different professions and their interest in the knowledge society can perhaps be summed up in the following statement by the economist, Peter Drucker:

Knowledge workers, even though only a large minority of the work force, already give the emerging knowledge society its character, its leadership, its central challenges and its social profile. They may not be the ruling class of the knowledge society, but they already are its leading class. In their characteristics, their social positions, their values and their expectations, they differ fundamentally from any group in history that has ever occupied the leading, let alone the dominant position. In the first place, the knowledge worker gains access to work, job and social position through formal education. (Drucker, 1994)

Formal education can be seen as the entry key to the knowledge society and is taken for granted in *Choose an occupation*. The book offers no other alternatives to its targeted readers, it is not a question of higher education or not, but rather *which* education and information seekers are encouraged to focus on *subjects* that interest them. The underlying assumption is that higher education develops the human being and consequently the quality of society in general. Information in *Choose an occupation* is constructed as information about paths through higher education to professions. By constructing information in this manner it focuses the seeker on the educational requirements of different occupations rather than on the occupation as such, thus limiting and defining what the seeker is looking for but at the same time mediating a wider perspective on the value of education. It is also communicated that the professions are knowledge-based and that knowledge is initially acquired through formal education.

A conviction in the agency of individuals is also expressed in the extract from *Choose an occupation*; it is directed to an active agent "you", with "your choice" and a referral to educating "yourself for your own development". The idea of the active individual with many choices to make can be traced in part to Ulrich Beck's ideas of the risk society and individualization (1992), in that active and reflective choice-making is emphasised as an imperative in modern society. Beck, however, dissociates himself from the neo-liberal definition of individualisation that builds upon the idea of the individual who derives his capacity for action from within himself and describes the risk concept more as an insight on the individual's dependence on networks and institutions, what he calls "institutionalised

individualism". In *Directions for SACO* (2001) this view of the individual's position is emphasised:

Individual solutions are not an alternative to security for all members. Even those who manage most matters on their own can find themselves in a situation where they need help to pursue their claims with the aid of union competence and specialists. Individual solutions should grow out of the rules and regulations that we create together (SACO, 2005:3).

By emphasising that the knowledge society is based on individual development (knowledge bearers) via their occupations SACO seeks to mediate that professional development and values play a leading role in the development of society (ibid). Thus, by constructing the individual as active in making choices in *Choosing occupations* SACO implies that the individual, through an active and personal choice of higher education, ensures him or herself a role in the development of society and in networks where professional interests are safeguarded.

The construction of information and the individual in "The Student Handbook"

The Student Handbook published by the National Agency for Higher Education is basically a catalogue comprising Sweden's universities in alphabetical order followed by an index of programmes. It is introduced with general information about student loans, study conditions, insurance, studying abroad and application procedures interspersed with interviews with students that take up different aspects of student life. The descriptions of universities include a profile, a list of programmes and services and statistics covering numbers and gender distribution of students and staff, the number of reading places in libraries and the proportion of the budget devoted to library services. Excluded are, for example, statistics on computer access. The book focuses entirely on university studies and conditions of study; it opens declaring that "university studies" are "a way of life" and that "you will look back on it as one of the most enjoyable periods in your life":

It is all about your characteristics and talents – it is these you will develop. You are the only one who can know why you want to study. It can only be you that bears the answer to the question – what is a university education good for? ... One of the Agency's assignments is by evaluation to ensure the high quality of all the subjects and programmes offered at universities. Another is to inform the public about which universities there are and which educations they offer. This is what *The Student Handbook* is for (2003:3. My translation).

Information is here constituted as reliable facts on which the reflective reader may base their choice; everything included in the book is, after all, quality assured by the Agency. The prospective student is offered a descriptive array of programmes, courses and universities and is invited to draw his or her own conclusions on the basis of the statistics for each university. The individual is therefore constituted as independent and solely responsible for their own choices. No information whatsoever is afforded about the occupations studies might lead to. Further, it is not before page 51 in the book that the information seeker is informed of the following:

Under each university you will find a list of the subjects and programmes the university provides. But, only subjects that can be majors in a Master's

examination (at least 80 credits) or a Bachelor's examination (at least 60 credits) are included (ibid:51).

Apart from practical purposes, that courses giving less than 60 credits are not included may also be a reflection of educational policy i.e.: "The government wants the Swedish working population to be the best educated in the world" (Prop. 2004/5:1:29). In turn, this statement can be connected to the idea of the knowledge society and the government's goal for its education policy:

Education strengthens people and gives them the power to meet change in an increasingly knowledge-based society ... The goal of education policy is that Sweden shall be a leading knowledge nation characterised by education of high quality and lifelong learning for growth and justice (ibid:35).

To confuse the information seeker by including a plethora of shorter courses might therefore divert the reader's attention from focusing on a long-term coherent line of studies. It might not be in interests of the Agency's policy to encourage young people to consider short courses - although it might well be in the interests of the universities themselves (who in turn deluge prospective students with information on both programmes and shorter courses).

Apart from guaranteeing the quality of courses and programmes taken up in the booklet the university descriptions are singularly free from value-laden epithets, thus emphasising that it is for the information seeker to make a choice on the basis of facts. This view of the independent and active individual is reiterated in several policy documents, for example, Mats Ekholm, director general of the Swedish National Agency for Education and Elisabeth Loberg define the goal of study and occupational guidance as follows:

... to make the student aware of the contents of an education or an occupation, the demands they place on the individual and the consequences and possibilities they bring with them. Study and occupational guidance builds on a democratic approach and is a pedagogical method that aims to provide individuals with the support they need in order to independently examine, formulate and develop their interests and by these means make their own well-informed choices of education or occupation (Ekholm & Loberg, 2001:6)

As with *Choose an occupation* this view of the individual's ability to make independent choices can be traced to Beck and the notion of the risk society. Basically, Beck sees the emergence of the risk society as a development of society brought about by an escalating number of hazards, such as environmental pollution on a global scale, together with the detraditionalisation of society, that is; that the "norms and values which act as collective cultural guides in our lives are waning in influence and this is reflected in a much more fluid understanding of families, employment and community life" (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002:3). Life is simply much more uncertain and choices more risk-filled. This view of society as increasingly risk-filled is endorsed in *The Student Handbook*:

Conditions on the labour market change rapidly. If the situation is difficult for a certain occupation during a period it might very well have changed a few years later. Prognoses are, of course, interesting, but put your interests first when you choose an education or an occupation. Higher studies do not guarantee career paths. But if you have a good education you will have the tools to address,

structure and solve problems ... To continue to be attractive on the labour market you may need to complement your education or learn something completely new. (2003:25)

According to Beck individuals must become more reflexive about their actions if they are to manage their lives in the face of such uncertainty and also in the face of the number of choices that are now open to them (Beck, 1994). However, the notion of the risk society brings with it certain assumptions: that there *are* more choices to be made, that people in the past had fewer choices; that social origin is no longer a predictor of adult social status. This, despite the fact that study after study reveal that social class, gender and ethnicity still impact on the occupational and study choices of young people. By constituting young people as solely responsible for the choices they make may have the effect of relieving politicians of the necessity for political action, interpreting the risk-taking of young people as something to be solved on an individual level through "well-informed choice", thus ignoring or minimizing the power of social barriers.

An arena for conflict?

The examination above reveals that information and the information seeker are constructed in different ways in the literature depending to a large extent on the institutionalised views and interests of their authors. In *18 at last!* information is presented as inspiration for people with entrepreneurial traits thus excluding individuals who do not identify with the image of an entrepreneur. The view of information in *Choose an occupation* is primarily information about higher education in relation to professions where the information seeker is constructed as an individual pursuing their interests and self-development through formal education in order to take a position in a knowledge society. *The Student Handbook* takes a similar view although information is constructed as reliable facts about higher education and the information seeker as independent and reflective in a risk-filled knowledge society.

Careers advisors are themselves professionals with their own interests to safeguard and further. Their professional jurisdiction is based on knowledge of the education system, working life and the labour market. It is therefore in their professional interest to assert the complexity and interrelationship of all three and to establish their own significance as a support for young people in information seeking and choice processes. The ethical declaration of study and occupational guidance also constructs a view of information and the information seeker. There is, for example, an assumption that information can be neutral: "The career advisor shall provide the seeker with complete information that is not coloured by interest groups (Vägledarföreningen, 2005). This assumption reinforces the idea of the careers advisor as "the spider in the web" capable of and willing to process information from the different actors before passing it on in a neutral state to the information seeker, although they are themselves agents of government and expected to implement social policies. In order to do so the information seeker is constructed in a number of ways; as a unique individual with rights, as a possible subject of discrimination on several grounds, as in need of compensation for lack of cultural capital, and as weak and vulnerable (ibid). The support offered by the careers advisor is itself embedded in bureaucratic settings, for example, guidance is based on the assumption that young people will come voluntarily to the office; thus it is questionable if it will reach out to those who already feel marginalized. By constructing the individual as in need of support on several counts careers advisors thus legitimate their own role in several ways.

Conclusion

From an institutional perspective it is revealed how the information seeker might (unconsciously or not) be guided by institutional assumptions that are taken for granted and embedded in the information mediated to school leavers. For example, that an entrepreneurial personality is appropriate in a market place view of society; that Sweden's welfare depends wholly on the success of its, by definition, courageous entrepreneurs; that the risk-filled knowledge society will provide occupations for the highly educated provided they carefully consider and make many choices along their educational pathways. Influence in society accrues the highly-educated with its flip-side that the knowledge society does not have room for the unskilled. Education in itself is portrayed as a tool the individual can use to solve all kinds of future problems with the implication that as long as you are educated you do not have to worry about the market value of the subject content of studies. The information seeker is constructed in a variety of ways that is in keeping with the interests of various groups. Further research will hopefully shed light on how school leavers themselves understand and act on the often conflicting messages mediated to them through directed information.

Information is mediated bearing the stamp of its origins although those origins are seldom explicit. This study has implications for career advisors and for librarians that make careers information accessible for the public: school leavers need support in critically evaluating all types of information. This may be achieved by helping young people to develop their analytic skills thus increasing young people's awareness of the values and vested interests promoted by the different actors in the system. In turn, different perspectives on the value of higher education and on the needs of the labour market can provide young people both with a range of repertoires on which to base their actions and with a tool with which they can discern their best alternatives from an individual perspective. Furthermore, it may be possible to develop technical solutions that increase the transparency of informational literature designed for school leavers thus making it easier for the individual to trace the sources of the perspectives mediated in the literature.

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ⁱ Career guidance refers to services and activities intended to assist school leavers to make educational, training and occupational choices. The activities may take place on an individual or group basis and may be face-face or at a distance (including help lines and web based services). They include career information provision and education (in print, ICT-based and other forms), assessment and self-assessment tools, counselling interviews, organised visits to work-places and professionals.