



## What Did the Professor Learn While Visiting the Preschool?

Anne Lise Wie

Nord University, Norway

### Abstract

*While visiting a preschool I met Ludvik, a five-and-a-half-year-old boy. He is in the stage of early literacy; he cannot read or write, but he is exploring letters. This paper presented is a case study [1], and an aim is to show the relevance of the sociocultural learning theory [2] for the university professor as vessel of competence to be shared with his or her teacher training students. As a visitor in the preschool, I usually take part in the on-going activities aiming to learn more of the everyday-life there and children's development especially when it comes to literacy. In this paper I give a presentation of what I learned and how my students may benefit from my encounter with Ludvik.*

**Keywords:** *Early literacy, invented spelling, preschool, narrative*

Ludvik is a five-and-a-half-year-old boy, and I am visiting his preschool. As I am writing in my journal, he comes over to me, bringing with him pencils and a sheet of paper and sits down next to me. He writes a number of random letters on his paper, asking me to read to him what he has written. I am a bit hesitant, but he urges me. He finds it hilarious when I read the strange words. He folds the paper in two, writes some numbers and a sign on the front and tells me 'This is a book. That is the price tag.' Then he writes his name. I ask if he can read the letters in his name. He knows all the letters and reads them aloud to me: 'L, U, D, volcano, I, K'. [12]

For a lecturer in preschool teacher training visiting preschools on regular basis is a way to learn more about the field and to keep updated. The idea is to observe what the various participants do, take part in the on-going activities, collecting data and trying to learn more of the everyday life in a preschool, as well as children's development, literacy and interests. This paper will look into what can be learned from this brief encounter with Ludvik, and how this narrative could be used in preschool teacher training. An aim of the paper is to show the relevance of the sociocultural learning theory [2] for the university professor, where participating in a community with speech and practical activity is important for the professor's own learning.

This is a case study, where one sees the child as an individual, instead of as a part of a larger group [1]. "Case studies can only disprove the universality of generalizations; we cannot generalize from one case to many." [3]. A case study may have the form of a narrative [4], and in teacher training the narrative is used as a method to learn more about the connection between theory and practice. Bruner presents the narrative "...as a way of thinking, as a structure for organizing our knowledge, and as a driving force in the educational process ..." [my translation] [5]. "In order to develop pedagogical knowledge, it is essential to discover – and reflect on – possible links between theory and practice; where experiences from practice, knowledge developed from these experiences, and more general theories are included" [my translation] [6].

When visiting a preschool, the best way to get acquainted is to sit down and let the children take the initiative; mostly they are curious of who the visitor is and start asking all kinds of questions. The day this narrative occurred, the weather was inclement, and the children were confined indoors. Papers and pencils were brought out for the children to draw. One of the boys wanted to use his sheet of paper to make an airplane, and soon a group of boys were running around throwing paper airplanes. In this busy environment Ludvik sought the calm nook where the visiting professor was seated.

In the sociocultural learning theory, participating in a community with speech and practical activity is important for the child's development [2]. The sociocultural theories emphasize studying the processes that are part of the activities the children take part in and can be supported and guided to become the most complete participants [7]. In the above situation the plan was to let Ludvik lead the activity and the conversation.

A simple definition for literacy is the ability to read and write [8]. "In a broader sense, literacy today refers to a composed and complex competence, which implies skills in creating meaning using various characters and various modalities. This competence will always be influenced by both social



and cultural conditions” [my translation] [9]. Literacy is not something that starts when the child learns to read and write, most children will encounter a number of situations from birth where texts are a part. The oral language the child learns from birth until he or she starts school is often referred to as “early literacy.” [9].

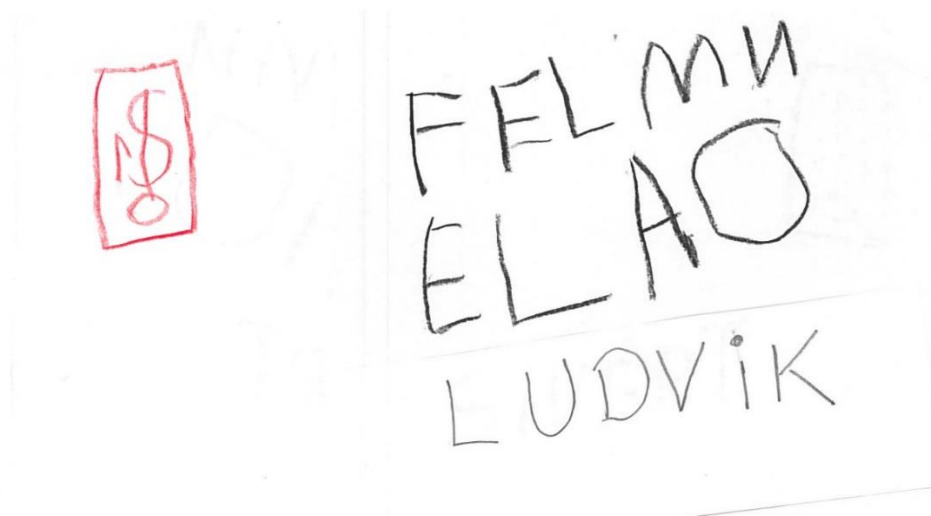


Illustration: Ludvik's book

Ludvik is *exploring* writing; he shows knowledge around the concept “book” through making one. A book has pages, and he folds the paper, thus creating two pages that could be opened and closed. A book has letters, and it can be bought in a shop; he writes letters inside and draws a price tag on the front page. Hagtvet [10] gives a description on how the child learns to read and write in distinct stages, and according to this, Ludvik is in the logographic stage. At this stage the child remembers the shape of the letters but has no phonetic insight; it is a matter of copying letters as icons or images. The child is often able to write single words that he or she has seen frequently; typically, their own name [10]. Ludvik knew the letters he wrote could make a word, but was not able to put them together himself and create meaning; thus asking to have it read. According to Hagtvet the correct answer to this request should be to tell the child to read the text aloud himself, because the child may put a meaning to writings only he or she as author would be able to express [10]. The choice to not pressure Ludvik to read himself, might in the light of theory be up for discussion, but in the situation seemed right. The randomly written letters were like a riddle for Ludvik that he wanted the adult present to solve. This is a good example of how a young learner takes the initiative challenging the adult to provide a scaffolding for the learning process [2]

In English, the term “invented spelling” is often used for this early stage, it “is an attempt to avoid labellings such as ‘mistake’ ‘error’; but it itself obscures the processes that children engage in in making their sense of this bit of semiotic world” [11]. But Ludvik was not only using invented spelling; he also invented a name for one of the letters. The conversation continued as follows:

‘What was the name of that letter’, I ask and point at the “v”. Ludvik looks seriously at me, and answers ‘I call it “volcano”’. ‘That is a good name’, I respond. Then he explains ‘It is two roads up to the top of a mountain and you can walk up on both sides, and when you reach the top, there is a hole there and it is filled with lava. It is a volcano.’

Then he tells a story about a volcano pouring out lava outside on the playground, the lava was red. He explains that it was not for real - just in case I would not understand. Then he goes back to his letters again. He looks at me ‘do you want me to make a book for you?’ ‘Yes please’ I answer. [12]

There might have been varied reasons for the naming of the letter. The first sound in the word “volcano” is a “v”. Ludvik might have seen a picture of a volcano in combination with the written word and recognized the letter “v” from it. However, he himself provided a third explanation: In his mind the shape of the letter looks like a volcano. Making a volcano in the playground using baking soda earlier this year was an event that had made a major impact on him. This is an example of a child's playful and inventive mind at work. Being in the logographic stage, Ludvik remembers the letters as icons or images, and they resemble something that makes them easier to remember. The letter itself might have served to trigger the memory of the volcano in the playground, which is indeed what letters are



for: To write down a story by means of encoding a visualisation. This demonstrates that Ludvik is showing curiosity and a growing understanding of the concept of reading. His curiosity is motivational, giving him the urge to learn to read the letters on his own, which leads him well down the transitional path from early literacy to literacy.

This case study of Ludvik would ideally be presented for the preschool teacher students, exemplifying different topics to address. The main idea would be to reflect on it in order to create awareness, though not necessarily to reach a solution. Sharing valuable insight and experience from the field is an important contribution to not only the contents of the course, but also important for the teacher to provide a modelling learning context. This is done by lifting a concrete incident and situation from the individual to the general [6]. A narrative, which here is a major part of a case study, may be reflected on and analysed, but one should always be aware that one cannot explain a story; all one can do is give different interpretations [5].

The brief encounter with Ludvik is a reminder of the importance of the university professor being in touch with the future field of his or her students. Only through a first-hand encounter with learners like Ludvik, may the professor not only experience, but also learn from the individuals, rather than the traditional generalisations of textbook theories. This not only develops the professor's own competence; the professor carrying out work in the field makes him or her a co-learner along with the students. Being in the field one learns about being present, listening and being a communication partner. Student reflections around the case could provide different responses, and the joint aim of professor and students would be to together learn more about the child's development in literacy through sociocultural learning and connectivism.

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