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Citizenship as individual responsibility through personal investment – an ethnographic study in a study circle

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to shed light on how the democratic ideal of institutionalised Nordic popular education is realised through an ethnographic field study in an English as a foreign language study circle. The study focuses on how participants express their citizenship when taking part in the study circle. Citizenship is viewed as a dynamic concept comprising the aspects of 'being' and 'acting' and constructed in and through social interaction. The study circle is arranged as a classroom practice: The study circle leader organises the activities, while the participants engage in exercises and attempt to learn correct usage. Through their participation, the participants take individual responsibility for what they see as their lack of sufficient knowledge of English. The participants describe their participation as a personal and voluntary investment in themselves. In light of the study, the individual stance is discussed as limiting possibilities for responsibility and thus expressions of citizenship.

Keywords: citizenship; ethnography; liberal adult education; popular education; study circle

Introduction

'Pick up a language you have almost forgotten, discover an entirely new one, or renew your knowledge. By studying a language, you gain more from your vacation or business meeting'. With these words, the brochure of one of the nation-wide study associations in Sweden greets potential participants in a language study circle. In the same brochure, after the initial greeting, the reader is informed about the Common European Framework for the assessment of language skills and knowledge (see Council of Europe, 2016). The potential participant should assess their level of knowledge in accordance with the



framework to pick the right course. If the reader is uncertain about his or her personal language level, there is a free language test on the study association's web page.

Study circles are part of Swedish popular education, which consists of state-subsidised educational practices with high levels of participation with regard to the entire population. Popular education strives to make knowledge accessible to people through practices that allow participants to influence the organisation of the studies by, for example, taking participants' previous experience into account. These forms of practices are further thought to be linked to the democratic ideals of study circles; that is, to provide possibilities for different groups to accumulate and disseminate knowledge in a democratic manner, and to articulate their interests and needs (Harding, 2011; Laginder, Nordvall, & Crowther, 2013). The low-threshold practices of study circles, whereby a small group gathers on a regular basis to study a topic of their own interest, are especially thought to support democracy in everyday life (Larsson, 2001). In general, study circle practices are thought to be connected to democracy and to developing and learning as a citizen regardless of subject.

The idea of Nordic popular education as a fundamentally collective endeavour has been questioned in recent years. Korsgaard (2008) has described contemporary popular education as interwoven with individualisation and 'personal enlightenment (or education)' (*personlig oplysning*, Korsgaard, 1997). Sundgren (2012) has proposed that the function of modern Swedish popular education can be understood as 'making the circumstances a bit more meaningful', not as providing an arena for political struggles or deliberations. Niemelä (2011) has suggested a similar development of increasing emphasis on individualisation and personal development in Finnish popular education since the 1960s. Nevertheless, Nordic popular education is still considered a potential supporter of citizenship and a functioning democracy (Andersson & Laginder, 2013).

The view on the role of adult education in general, as furthering both individual and collective change in democratic societies, has in recent decades been described as shifting from emancipatory to empowering (Wildemeersch & Salling Olesen, 2012). In other words, participants in adult education are expected to be individually responsible, focusing on individual employability as an important aim for adult education (Bagnall, 2010; Zeuner, 2013). Individual citizens are thought to need recurrent learning, which is part of the responsibilities they should attend to (Sandberg, Fejes, Dahlstedt, & Olson, 2016). Further, this assumption of individual responsibility is framed in relation to ideas about freedom of choice. Citizens, as members in associations or participants in educational practices, seem to be treated as customers and consumers. As such, they are not supposed to participate in decision-making about common activities, but rather to accept or discard the services offered (Åberg, 2013; Bauman, 1999; Wildemeersch & Salling Olesen, 2012).

Previous research has also portrayed an ambivalent picture of the realisation of democratic ideals in study circles (Andersson & Laginder, 2013; Larsson, 2001; Lundberg, 2009). In combination with a lack of previous studies focusing on study circle practices as such (Nordzell, 2011), there is a need for further research on study circle practices from a democratic and citizenship perspective. A small but growing body of research on citizenship education and popular education is addressing questions like this, focusing on the discourses (e.g., Fejes, Olson, Rahm, Dahlstedt, & Sandberg, 2016) or enactments (e.g., Rahm & Fejes, 2015) of citizenship among students. These perspectives are positioned as an alternative to highlighting, for example, employability questions, skills needed, or more philosophical perspectives in relation to citizenship education.

In relation to the abovementioned discussions, we are interested in understanding how the democratic ideals informing study circle activities might be realised in the practices

of a study circle. The aim of this article is to shed light on how the participants express their citizenship in and through their participation in a study circle. The study was conducted as an ethnographic field study in an English as a foreign language study circle. In the following sections, previous research and, thereafter, the theoretical concepts of the article, are discussed. Next, methodological considerations are discussed and the field study is presented. The analysis highlighting citizenship as ‘being’ and ‘acting’ follows. The article ends with a concluding discussion that focuses on the dilemmas in this study circle in relation to the democratic potentials of study circle practices.

Previous research on participation in study circles

The investigated context in this article is an example of a kind of popular education organised by study associations in Sweden (in Swedish, *studieförbund*). These study circle activities are institutionalised, that is, there is an organisation providing structures and financing to support the realisation of the activities through state subsidies (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Participation in study circles constitutes an opportunity for participants to free themselves from domestic and professional obligations and to influence and change their living conditions together with others (Laginder et al., 2013). The ideal study circle is considered to be a small democracy in which the participants can build on their previous knowledge and influence the circle’s content and working methods (Åberg, 2008; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Thus, equality between the study circle leader and the participants is pivotal. An important organisational principle is consequently detachment from what is understood to be the rigid, teacher-led lecturing methods of a traditional school (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). At the same time, the study circle might never be totally free from such traditional influences, as it is most often a fixed group meeting at a certain time, during a certain period, to study a certain subject (Salo & Rönnerman, 2014). It could even be argued that a partial support from an organisational structure is important for democratic learning (Harding, 2011).

The democratic ideal does not always seem to be fully realised in the practices of study circles (Larsson, 2001). An equal conversation, with all participants both listening and being heard, constitutes an ideal that is challenging to fully obtain (Lundberg, 2009). Participants in study circles also often assume that they need to take on a passive role and follow the instructions of the circle leader. The function of the study circle leader generally seems to be at the centre of a conflict between what is understood as the ideal study circle and what is perceived as possible under the practical circumstances (Andersson & Laginder, 2013). On the one hand, the participants are expected to be active and influence both the content and working methods of the circle; on the other hand, the atmosphere of the circle is expected to be comfortable and welcoming, possibly prohibiting the participants from trying to exert too much influence. For the activities to run smoothly in this context, the circle leader might feel it is his or her responsibility to be in charge. Additionally, sticking to the topic of the circle eliminates the risk of touching upon private and potentially uncomfortable issues.

Rather than directly supporting the realisation of democratic ideals, participation in study circles can be understood as providing opportunities for personal development and meaningful spare-time activities (Andersson, Laginder, Larsson, & Sundgren, 1996; Sundgren, 2012). It has been argued that this reflects a historic shift whereby study circles have developed from building upon collective concerns to focusing on individual interests and needs (Andersson & Laginder, 2013). However, the social and collective reasons for participating are still considered to be important (Andersson et al., 1996; Laginder &

Stenøien, 2011). For example, the participants' collective actions taken to create a study circle have been described as happening through acts of mutual fondness, resulting in a co-production of a circle narrative (Nordzell, 2011). Nordzell shows that the participants co-create the study circle by communicating intensively, interrupting and interposing, asking questions, commenting on others' remarks, and laughing together.

Recent research indicates, however, that the neo-liberal notion of individual freedom stressing personal responsibility is also affecting the view of students as citizens in Swedish popular education (Fejes et al., 2016). Nevertheless, individualisation does not necessarily mean a decrease in the potential for changing the living conditions of the participants. Instead, interest-driven learning can be understood as creating a needed distance from everyday life, allowing for a space for commitment and coherence not necessarily found in contemporary society (Laginder & Stenøien, 2011).

Citizenship as acting and being

To make sense of the study circle activities as participants' expressions of citizenship, the concept of citizenship is here understood to be broad and dynamic, comprising participatory and existential conceptions beyond that of formal status as the relationship between individuals and society (Bagnall, 2010). The assumption is that for the individual to be a citizen, he or she must always be part of different communities and social contexts that need to be maintained and continuously (re)negotiated (Biesta, 2014; Wildemeersch, 2014). Citizenship concerns both the individual and the individual's relationships to others. Citizenship as an individual's societal status is not excluded in this perspective; however, that aspect is not of primary concern in this study. Instead, citizenship is viewed as consisting of dynamic aspects relating to how the citizen is willing and capable of relating to and making use of the role of citizenship. Furthermore, citizenship is tied to the citizen's perception of the role of citizenship and its possibilities, as well as how the citizen sees himself or herself in relation to different living contexts (Bagnall, 2010).

In this study, citizenship is understood to consist of aspects of 'acting' and 'being', in line with, for instance, Biesta, De Bie and Wildemeersch (2014, p. xiii), who define education as the support of 'democratic ways of being and doing'; and Brooks and Holford (2009, p. 96), who understand citizenship learning as comprising 'dimensions of identity and action'. In the perspective employed in this article, educational processes are vital in preserving and re-establishing the dynamics of citizenship (Biesta, 2011, 2014). The aspect of being a citizen includes a sense of belonging in different contexts. In other words, being a citizen entails sharing identities with others and being able to organise oneself in different communities. The aspect of acting as a citizen includes striving towards autonomous thinking and a preparedness to act either to counteract perceived injustices or maintain the status quo. At the same time, being and acting as a citizen involves relations to individual human beings and their shared living contexts, including a willingness to compromise and respectfully disagree (Biesta, 2014; Wildemeersch, 2014); in other words, to seek knowledge collaboratively. Being and acting as a citizen is a process that is paradoxically individual yet only possible in relation to others.

Ethnography of the study circle

The aim of this study is to understand the participant perspective of the everyday life of a study circle practice. That is, from an ethnographic tradition, the aim is to study the social actions of the participants first hand through participant observation in a specific

context (Hammersley, 2006). The realisation of this aim relies on long-term presence and engagement in a particular field, where rich data are generated through systematic processes (Walford, 2009). The interpretive emphasis is on the lived culture in this field from the eyes of the participants, focusing on the broad question: What is going on here (Geertz, 1973)? This broad question is then narrowed by the research interest. In this case, the focus is more specifically on the expressions of citizenship in and through the study circle. That is, the kinds of expressions discoverable from the participant perspective.

Alongside an interest in the participant perspective, an ethnographic stance includes the goal of developing an ‘analytic understanding of perspectives, activities and actions’ (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4). This understanding is likely to differ from those of the participants in the study, meaning that the participants in the English study circle would probably describe their participation differently than the description portrayed in this article. Even though the ethnographic analysis draws on actual social expressions in the circle, the employed theoretical framework allows the understanding to reach beyond what is seen from a strict participant perspective. This tension between the ambition to understand the informants’ or participants’ perspectives on the one hand, and the more distanced analysis of them and their behaviour on the other, can even be argued to constitute ‘the essence of ethnography’ (2006).

The contribution of an ethnographic analysis lies in its ability to make use of a micro-perspective to bring relevant order to what might seem either confusing or all too familiar. Ethnography focuses on the ‘mundane’ and the ‘routine’ (Walford, 2009), and in this particular study this comprises the routines that constitute and make sense of expressions of citizenship in the study circle. Ethnographic description is ‘thick’ and interpretive and concerns social discourses and attempts to preserve what is being said and done in communicable terms. The objective is to be precise and avoid ambiguity when communicating the findings about the everyday lives studied (2009). These descriptions by the ethnographer consist of imagined constructions, and they are always of a second or third order since only a native can make first-order interpretations. The culture at hand can be accessed empirically by taking in and inspecting relevant events – not through an abstract arrangement of entities into patterns (Geertz, 1973; Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

It is important, in ethnographic studies, to reflect on the appropriate context for understanding the examined social actions (Hammersley, 2006; Walford, 2009). In this case, the context of the study was narrowed down to the study circle in question with some reference to the institutional logics of the association organising the study circle. This is not an unusual stance within current ethnography, since participants in one context can lead very different lives in the rest of their day-to-day engagements (Hammersley, 2006). Capturing all these different participant circumstances would be challenging and likely result in an amount and breadth of data that would make an analysis virtually impossible. This form of choice of context leads to some delimitations of this study. The study of a specifically defined social site does not yield understanding of what the persons involved are doing and saying in other parts of their lives; moreover, general conclusions cannot be drawn about actions within the study circle as products solely of the situations within the circle.

Another kind of understanding could have been attained if the study context had been more broadly defined to include other aspects of participants’ lives. Nevertheless, how this broader context should be determined and how knowledge about it should be gained are difficult questions that do not necessarily have any satisfactory answers (Hammersley, 2006). Considering a broader context was not perceived as necessary in this case to obtain an understanding of what it means to be a participant in a study circle from a citizenship

perspective. According to the literature, it is reasonable to assume that the circle can constitute a democratic setting (Larsson, 2001). Thus, we draw on a theoretically informed stance (Walford, 2009) to argue that the context of the study circle, in itself, is enough to obtain ethnographic knowledge about what it is to express citizenship in and through the study circle. In the following, this stance is elaborated on by discussing the principles and practices of the field study in more detail, including some analytical considerations.

Choosing the site and entering the field

Entering the field of ethnographic fieldwork is, in Geertz's (1973, p. 13) words, all about 'finding our feet'. This process represents a balancing act that should neither end up with the researcher becoming one of 'the natives' nor seeking to mimic them. The aim, in all its simplicity and complexity, is to converse with the persons in the field. In this case, one of the two authors (Annika Pastuhov) was the ethnographer conducting the fieldwork. The study circle examined in this article was chosen with the help of the director of a study association (*studieförbund*). A meeting was arranged to discuss the research interests and possible study circles to take part in. The initial interest was guided by openness on the part of the ethnographer who, at the same time, stressed an interest in finding a circle with a leader who would willingly accept the researcher. The first suggestion was to participate in an English study circle, which ultimately became the case study. As the ethnographer began attending this circle, the aim of the research was briefly presented and participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions. The participants were told that participation was voluntary and that they would remain anonymous in the study reporting. The participants accepted this, with none expressing reluctance to participate in the study on these terms.

The site in ethnographic fieldwork needs to be chosen for particular purposes in order for the study to provide a basis for further systematic analysis (Walford, 2009). The reasons for choosing a language study circle are twofold. Firstly, languages constitute an extensive part of organised study circles in Sweden – including humanistic subjects, the majority of which (16% of all arranged study circles in 2015) consist of language circles (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2016). Nevertheless, few previous studies about participation in study circles have focused on language circles (a recent exception is Nordzell, 2011). Secondly, a language circle is potentially interesting from a citizenship point of view. There is a prevailing assumption that languages are typically taught in a teacher-led way (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Nordzell, 2011). At the same time, learning languages constitutes an important pathway for broadened opportunities for communication, especially by learning a *lingua franca* such as English.

The English study circle group consisted of 12 participants, six men and six women, of which two were retired and the rest were between the ages of 30 and 60 and employed. Beginning in early September, the group gathered once a week, for 12 weeks to learn elementary English under the guidance of a study circle leader. One of the participants had not studied English in compulsory education, while the rest of the group had some basic knowledge of the language from previous formal education. We gathered in a large building in the city centre that holds different educational activities. Besides the office spaces of the study association, the facility also houses a lower and upper secondary school.

The ethnographer attended nine of the gatherings during the autumn of 2014, solving exercises and taking part in the activities. Participating in the study circle as a whole is

considered an important principle for obtaining ethnographic understanding (Hammersley, 2006). Even though the intent was to be one of the participants, this was not possible since it immediately became apparent that the ethnographer's knowledge of English was to some extent more comprehensive than that of the other participants. This was evident, for instance, in different types of conversation exercises, which led to the ethnographer helping the other participants from time to time, but only if asked to do so. Otherwise, the ethnographer tried to keep a low profile by, for example, not immediately giving suggestions for answers. But if someone asked for help, it felt quite natural and reasonable to assist. To pretend otherwise would probably have been considered dishonest and could even have been regarded as morally questionable.

The main sources of data are field notes (35 pages) written in part during, but mostly directly after (cf. Walford, 2009), each of the study circle sessions, and audio recordings of eight of the sessions (11 hours in total). Secondary data include copied task sheets from the lessons, brochures from the study association, some e-mail conversations with the director and the study circle leader, and a one-hour interview with the study circle leader. Initially, there was also an attempt to complement the participatory observations with some focus group interviews. Unfortunately, interest in participating was meagre, and therefore no participant interviews were conducted. The analysis of the data was informed by the field notes as an initial, naïve way of understanding the meanings and consequences of the social interactions taking place in the study circle (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). The field notes were then subject to further reflection and scrutiny in relation to the audio recordings and expressions of the informants over the course of the fieldwork (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001, p. 5). The analysis proceeded with attempts to find surprising or conflicting patterns that would inform everyday life in the study circle, and also by relying on previous research on the subject (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 163).

Taking our seats and doing our exercises

The classroom as a social practice was chosen as a starting point for understanding the meanings and consequences of the social interactions in the study circle. This choice was informed by initial experiences during the fieldwork. The classroom practices include the dynamics of fitting into the crowd, submitting to evaluation by both the teacher and peers, and accepting the teacher as an authority leading the activities (Jackson, 1990; Sahlström, 1999). This represents an intriguing contrast to the ideals of the study circle described earlier.

Almost immediately during the first session, a pattern of 'doing school' is noticeable. We, the participants, find our seats among three rows facing the study circle leader's desk. We are here voluntarily, which means that we, in a way, actively consent to the role of the compliant and dutiful student. This role seems familiar to all of us: There is no hesitation as to what it means to do the exercises and participate in the learning activities. Typically, we work with different work sheets and do our grammatical or vocabulary exercises individually or in small groups. If we go through the answers after we have finished, everyone provides one answer each, followed by the study circle leader's response and evaluation. Wrong answers, of course, receive follow-up questions or explanations in order to work out the correct answer.

This setup could probably be described as expected when attending an activity providing lessons in a foreign language. At the same time, patterns for participation are to some extent even more restricted than, for example, in an elementary school. No

students with ‘motivational issues’ or otherwise ‘bad’ behaviour are found here. All participants are focused on and engaged in the activities. If someone arrives unprepared, this is not voiced. It seems like everyone always brings all their notes, copies from previous lessons, and pens as needed. Of the participants, the ethnographer seemed to be the only one constantly forgetting both previous paper copies and pens, causing feelings of guilt when compared to the seemingly well-prepared course-mates. The overall dutiful work ethic in the group is understandable since the participants are attending the study circle explicitly because they feel they lack knowledge in English. To achieve a better grasp of and improve our skills in English, we do as the circle leader tells us.

Most of us take notes frequently, and we are eager to determine the correct answers. The desire to know precise answers sometimes proves challenging, especially when there are no direct translations between English and Swedish. For example, at the beginning of our fourth session, when Tina wants to know the difference between using ‘good’ and ‘well’, she refers to the study circle leader previously answering the question ‘How do you feel?’ by replying ‘I feel well’. Tina mentions the common phrase ‘I feel good’ as a reason for why she is asking. The circle leader explains, quite extensively, that ‘things’ need ‘adjectives’ and ‘verbs’ need ‘adverbs’ to clarify the difference in use. The follow-up questions posed by other participants show that understanding this grammatical presentation is challenging. There still seems to be some confusion in the group. In an attempt to clarify, Marc asks, ‘Could you say, “She speaks English very well?”’ The circle leader confirms this is correct, and goes on to conclude that, ‘You wouldn’t say, “She speaks English good”’. Finally, we arrive at the specific distinction between Tina’s two example expressions, ‘I feel well’ and ‘I feel good’. The circle leader tells us, ‘Nowadays, a lot of people say “I’m good”, but it’s not correct’. Tina concludes by asking whether this means that both can be used. Even though the circle leader confirms this, she also points out that she does not like it. Tina responds with laughter, repeating the answer but stressing the fact that it is the circle leader’s opinion: ‘*You* don’t like it’. Seemingly wanting to move on in her teaching, the circle leader asks in a neutral, but polite, tone whether Tina’s question has been answered. After a somewhat hesitant answer from Tina – ‘I think so’ ending with a slight laugh – the theme of the leader-led conversation changes.

The participants quite often pose questions like this. Almost as often, they face problems of this kind, where the sort of answer they are looking for is not given straight away and sometimes not at all. Another type of feature worth noting is that this conversation takes place entirely in English, engaging four of the participants and the study circle leader, while the rest of the group listens attentively and shows no signs of having difficulty understanding.

Facing difficulties and the hesitation to leave our seats

The participants seem, in other words, to already be quite competent in both understanding and producing the foreign language they are studying. But this is not how they see it. On the contrary, the way the participants label and focus their own activities and contributions seems to emphasise their deficits. If opinions on the exercises are uttered, the tasks at hand are almost always thought to be ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’. The person’s own ability to understand is often questioned. The expressions range all the way from a simple ‘I don’t understand’ to a discouraged ‘I’m a total moron’. Perhaps as a result of the exercises being labelled as demanding, answering the study circle leader’s questions is often followed by a display of insecurity. Occasionally, the leader asks us to

read out loud what we have written in our homework or some other exercise. Quite often, this request is met with some hesitation and an insecure pitch, sometimes accompanied by self-conscious gestures, such as shoulder shrugs.

This suggests the participants are not confident about their skills and are unwilling to put themselves forward, which is even more apparent when it comes to physically stepping up in front of the rest of the group. Instances of this kind take place only a couple of times during the entire season. One example occurs at the very end of the fourth lesson, which is focused primarily on adjectives and their comparative and superlative forms. The last exercise of the evening is quite challenging. We have been sitting in small groups, trying to formulate different sentences according to a certain pattern. The first sentence takes quite a while to figure out, but finally, after negotiations in Swedish and repeated reminders by the study circle leader to use English, all five members of our group are able to jot down 'Monaco is smaller than Andorra, and Vatican City is the smallest'. After finishing five sentences of this kind, we are told to come up with a similar exercise of our own for the other two groups to solve. Quite quickly, our group begins to enjoy composing a sentence that is as difficult as possible. Some suggestions are put forward in English, but most of the discussion, especially the livelier statements, are in Swedish. When we realise someone needs to write our clues on the whiteboard, an eager, whispering negotiation, now only in Swedish, takes place, as no group member wants to volunteer: 'You go and write!'; 'Yuck, no, you go!'; 'I don't know how to spell it!' After a couple of requests from the circle leader in combination with a mildly insistent look, one group member walks up and writes the words without any protest.

This short scene is a fairly typical example of what goes on in the study circle and what participation is all about. The participants engage in difficult exercises that are nonetheless solved by the end of the session. Usually, the tasks are done independently or in pairs. When put together in groups, they cooperate, focusing on the task at hand. However, the participants prefer to play their roles as students completing exercises given to them rather than providing input on the content, not even in the form of writing on the whiteboard.

Contemplating the personal investment and saying our goodbyes

On the last study circle gathering, Christmas was one month away. As a gesture of appreciation to the participants for accepting the researcher, the ethnographer, about to leave the field, brought in gingerbread and chocolate, showing up a little earlier than usual to be able to greet everyone and offer them the sweets. There was some surprise on the faces of the other participants as they almost dutifully – some hesitantly, others more happily – helped themselves to the offerings. A feeling that the rest of the study-mates do not find this gesture to be in line with the rapport we have established during the last three months lingers. Nevertheless, it is not met by condemnation, but rather by courteous acceptance combined with a slight hint of indifference.

The study circle leader agreed to spare 15 minutes at the end of this last lesson for a short discussion with the group about their views on their studies and participation in the study circle, as well as the ethnographer's participation. When the circle leader initiates this last part of the night's session, one of the participants asks whether it is now okay to talk in Swedish. The circle leader confirms this and we change language. Firstly, the leader wants to know what we thought of the course. There is not much initial eagerness to contribute to this discussion. The study circle is, for example, described as 'good' and

having varying exercises. All responses are quite concise, and in only two minutes, this part of the discussion is over.

Accepting this, the study circle leader goes on to ask, ‘Why have you come to this course? What motivates you?’ When no one jumps in to answer this question right away, she goes on, ‘Why do you sacrifice a Tuesday night? And pay a lot of money for it?’ This incites some laughter in the group. One of the participants, Eric, states without hesitation or constraint that the participation is ‘an investment for oneself and the job’. The other participants seem to think that this pretty much sums it up and the rest of the answers are quite similar. Many return to the word ‘investment’ when talking about the meaning of participation. Most of the replies are quite short and refer either to the job or to, for example, travelling, where communication skills in English are useful. Nina reminds us that this kind of voluntary participation is more fun and inspiring compared to going to school.

Speaking of the difference between studying voluntarily as an adult and going to compulsory school in childhood, the study circle leader initiates a discussion about ‘a thing [the ethnographer] and I have been talking about... This format, the teaching, when I [the study circle leader] stand here, I write there, and you sit by your desks, quite as you did in school’. Here, the circle leader does not even have to pose a question before Nina reacts. ‘It feels safe this way!’ she claims, causing the rest to laugh. When asked what she means by that, she does not really elaborate. She just thinks, ‘It feels good when we do it like this, I don’t want to stand in the front’. The circle leader asks the whole group if this is what they expect, and gets some affirmative answers. Either you are a pupil or you are a leader or teacher, and since you as a participant are expected to be the pupil, you feel comfortable when this is realised in a well-known manner. Eric, again, concludes that the reluctance towards what is positioned against the role of the pupil, namely ‘standing and speaking there in the front’, is not alluring since it ‘is about stepping into the unknown, or unsafe, and then one sits here and feels more safe with that – of course – choosing the less unsafe option’. Several others seem to agree with this.

Then, the last 15 minutes were up. In the end, after a hesitant start, the discussion had engaged all those present. The circle leader hoped to see some of us again next year and wished us a Merry Christmas. This functioned as a final sign to all of us. Quite quickly, like all the other nights before, everyone emptied their seats, jackets disappearing from coat hangers, and we all hurried down the stairs and into the dark night. There and then, without anyone noticing or being concerned, our study circle group had ceased to exist.

Being and acting as the unknowing for becoming knowledgeable

When asked, the participants in the English study circle claim to be making an investment in themselves. In other words, the study circle consists of individuals who view themselves as responsible consumers. Furthermore, they repeatedly position themselves as pupils in relation to the English language, since acting like this feels familiar and safe. The composition of the group appears as random as a school class, even though voluntariness rather than obligation informs the explicit motives for participating in the study circle. It is clear that the group, just like any class in school, is formed only to be dissolved again in the near future. The group functions as a means of reaching the participants’ goals of gaining more knowledge. The participants attend with the intention that their investment in the study circle will help them leave behind the position of an unknowing pupil.

The orientation towards their knowledge of English is characterised by an aspiration for perfection. A considerable amount of attention is paid to identifying what is correct language use and what is not, which means identifying the limits of their knowledge. Their relationship to learning English is characterised by uttered expressions of deficits, focusing in particular on everything they do not yet know. The participants seem to think that studies leading to the mastery of the language should consist of solving difficult exercises. The participants themselves seem to choose this setup because of the security as well as efficiency it brings to the organisation of their studies.

When considering the aspect of 'being' as a citizen in and through the group, the participants orient themselves explicitly as individual consumers. The reason for attending this study circle as consumers is their current, expressed understanding of lack of knowledge of the English language. This is the identity they seem to be sharing, an identity that includes socialising only insofar as it is needed for completing their studies. According to the participants themselves, the 'acting' as a citizen in and through the circle is, in other words, a personal investment. They take responsibility for their deficiencies in English and strive to become more knowledgeable to meet the demands of both working life and leisure time. They attempt to achieve this by committing and adapting to the classroom practices. This adaptation is not combined with attempts to influence the study activities, but rather to accept the arrangements for what they are. Since all of the participants fulfilled the requirements, it might be suitable to conclude that they were content and found the investment worthwhile.

The expressions of citizenship in and through the study circle concern issues of fitting into the group and, at the same time, not having any need to establish social bonds. The participants seem to view themselves as individuals, completing their challenging exercises and then leaving for the night, not longing for any coffee breaks or other get-togethers with the rest of the group. Even though they commit individually to the tasks at hand, they do not want to be noticed as individuals, but rather as invisible parts of the study group.

Discussion

Citizenship as expressed in and through the participation in the English study circle concerns individual responsibility for personal betterment. At the same time, it also involves maintaining a mode of social interaction that is familiar to the participants, here portrayed as typical classroom practices (cf. Jackson, 1990; Sahlström, 1999). The citizenship here is furthermore a citizenship of choice, where the task of the citizen is to choose among ready alternatives, not collectively formulating alternatives to choose from (Bauman, 1999; Biesta, 2014). The study circle can thus be described as consisting of investing individuals who find themselves brought together to do exercises in order to reduce their perceived and expressed lack of knowledge in English. The focus on correctness sometimes seems to overshadow the fact that the participants are able to communicate about most issues in English. Rather, these investing individuals take responsibility for their own education (Sandberg et al., 2016) and act to improve their skills in English. To achieve this goal, the participants accept and adapt to the circumstances in the study circle.

The introductory text for the language circles provided by one of the Swedish study associations, cited in the beginning of this article, encourages the reader to choose a language course to 'gain more' from both business and leisure time. The potential study circle participant's current knowledge of languages can be assessed via the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2016). The view on knowledge reflected through this starting point is quite different from the one usually associated with study circles; that is, democratic knowledge production within the study group that draws on participants' previous knowledge and shared influence (Laginder et al., 2013; Larsson, 2001).

Instead, in the case of the English study circle, potential participants are assumed to be able to acquire knowledge after they first acknowledge their deficiencies and then choose to take measures against them, as part of a group yet still as individuals. The participants consider their participation voluntary; they have chosen this circle and its subject. However, after starting to attend the study circle, they no longer choose anything, nor do they make any particular attempts to influence their studies. The role of the participant is that of a customer who either finds the service good enough to accept or chooses not to consume it at all. To try and change the practices is out of the question, since the provided circle setup feels convenient and familiar, as stated by some of the participants. The importance of coming together as a group highlighted by study circle participants in previous research (Andersson & Laginder, 2013; Laginder & Stenøien, 2011; Nordzell, 2011) is absent in the English study circle. In contrast, the circle is regarded as necessary for tackling the lack of knowledge in English rather than as a motive for participating. In this sense, the study circle can be considered an example of popular education in an era of 'personal enlightenment' (Korsgaard, 2008; Niemelä, 2011), where participation in study circles provides an opportunity for personal meaning making (Sundgren, 2012), here expressed as taking personal responsibility as an obedient student.

The choice of ethnography for the empirical study allowed us to understand and scrutinise the study circle practices from the inside. This stance made it possible to make sense of individualistic traits according to the terms of the study circle practice. During the fieldwork, attempts were made to interact with the other participants. The results of these attempts were meagre. For example, it was not possible to conduct a focus group interview even after a couple of months in the field and frequent attempts to connect with the other participants. Paradoxically, we view this as an important result: It reveals something essential about the conditions for being and acting as a citizen in and through the study circle. The fact that the participants barely actualise other social contexts when attending the study circle further strengthens this argument. This also justifies our limitation of the study context primarily to the study circle, since it resonates with the participants' understanding of their activities (cf. Hammersley, 2006).

Expressions of citizenship as personal responsibility in and through the study circle raise questions about what this responsibility implies. What kind of actions are (im)possible for the participants in the study circle? What kind of freedom – a core ideal in popular education – do they have to act in this particular practice? Here, they choose to act and be in ways that are considered 'safe', without any ambition to influence the status quo. Voluntary participation and personal responsibility in the English study circle do not render a position where citizenship can be expressed as autonomously influencing the situation. Individual freedom could potentially also be gained through collective engagement, where the individual attains more personal freedom when allying with a collective of likeminded others. This is an idea Nordic popular education has traditionally drawn from. Setting aside the personal and individual in favour of collective perspectives could, perhaps paradoxically, open up possibilities for influence of each responsible individual in the English study circle in a more profound way.

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