Selling out Education in the Name of Digitalization: A Critical Analysis of Swedish Policy

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Background

- Digitalization is identified as an important policy area – an enabler for change and innovation with regards to contemporary global "wicked problems".

- Education is expected to play a leading role in the digitalization of society, but also to embrace new technologies and utilize their potential.

- Actors affiliated with the (tech) business sector are increasingly influencing educational policy through policy networks and soft governance.

- Sweden's educational system has been affected by a development away from the Nordic welfare model towards an increased adoption of market-oriented policies.

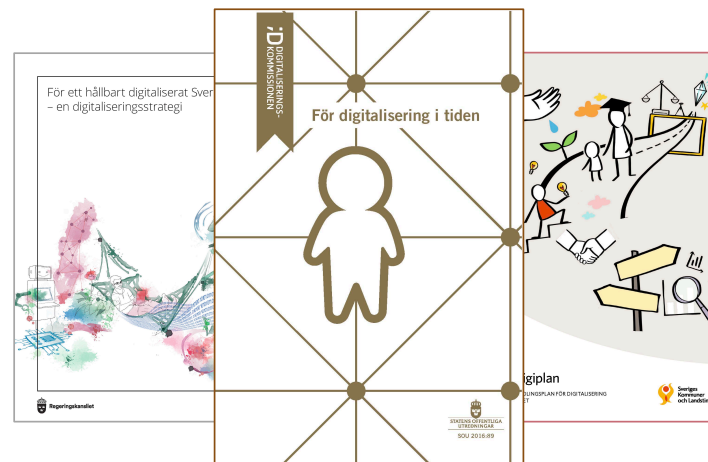- What does digitalization mean? A "fuzzy" concept.

Research questions

- How is reality framed in political arguments surrounding the digitalization of education?

- What discursive strategies are used to legitimize the digitalization of education?

- How are students, teachers and institutions, as well as teaching and learning, represented?

Why are these questions important?

Method and data

- Critical discourse analysis, influenced by political discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). Focus: identifying strategies for legitimizing digitalization of education in policy, and how they are ideologically framed.

- Material: sections related to digitalization of education in the government report 'För digitalisering i tiden' (2016)

Results (1)

Constructing Global Change and National (Digital) Solutions

Digitalization has changed the labor market leading to "the disappearance of many professions", "more and more people being self-employed and having temporary jobs"

Universities "will need to change their organization and way of conducting higher education".

Results (2)

Telling and Selling the Value of Educational Technology

Universities *must* act as "role models with regards to the use of technology"

"[Massive Open Online Courses] emphasize *the need* for a new web-based pedagogy and structure in higher education, where traditional lecture methods are abandoned in favor of different methods for active learning."

Educational technology

• "gives students *opportunities*… to process and improve their knowledge"

• facilitates learning "regardless of time and space"

• "*opens up possibilities*" for "the use of multiple senses in learning and for new forms of learning" (through flipped classroom, learning analytics, gamification).

"Traditional" vs. "new"

Results (3)

Legitimizing Action Through Threats of a Competitive Market

If universities do not change, there is a risk that "*other agents* with significantly greater *resources* and *production competence* will take over the *packaging* of scientific knowledge*".*

"The role of universities is then *reduced*"

Universities will "*lose* the commission of knowledge transfer" and risk *losing* appeal for researchers"

"other agents" – who?

"resources", production competence", packaging", "lose" (vs. win)
= market/competition discourse

Results (4)

Arguing Through Neoliberal Master Narratives

The entrepreneurial citizen is offered personalized opportunities to improve their possibilities on the market (through "digital competence"). It is the subject's own responsibility to "develop the skills needed", while society offers a "flexible" and "digitalized" system for "lifelong learning" (= lifelong "skills development")

Citizens must adapt to the needs of the market.
Responzibilization – implies reshaping individuals' explanations for the cause of problems/concerns from external structures to a failure in governing of the self

Results (5)

Recontextualizing Teaching and Learning
- "Individually adapted" **teaching** through publically available quality-assured lectures" combined with automatic feedback.
- The **teacher** as a "guide" and collector of data, in need of "incentives to teach more digitally".
- The **student** as a self-regulating, motivated, hard-working homo economicus, who "practices their entrepreneurial skills" and "cultivates excellence".
- **Education** as "challenge-driven", entrepreneurially directed, The result can be "measured in real-time through the technical education system".

Discussion

How can we better understand this neoliberal framing of education, against the background of the Swedish welfare model and its traditional values?

- Digitalization as an *amorphous* policy object, *connecting* various policy fields

- *Soft governance* – private actors are allowed large influence on policy formation (f. ex heavy reliance on "digital experts")

- *Floating definitions of welfare values* (Cox, 2004)