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”Are you good at dating?” The emergence of learning discourses in dating television

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Within various everyday practices there is a tendency to talk about, categorise and deal with what happens through discourses of learning. Popular culture reveals clear examples of how learning vocabularies and repertoires are used across activities like cooking, parenting, private finances and dating to attain what is displayed as better practice. Drawing upon perspectives highlighting the social dynamics in encounters, I have explored the issue of dating portrayed in a lifestyle television show through the research question: How is learning made relevant in talk on dating practices, and in what ways are subjectivities shaped through such discursive work? A close-up analysis of talk sequences indicates how the interlocutors use discursive resources to frame what happens as a learning event claiming pedagogical subjectivities, relationships and activities. Dating evolves around knowledgeability defining the novice positioning with the need to prepare oneself and cultivate adequate skills through practising. Addressing and promoting knowledgeability, practising and skilfulness as the key to success can empower adults, however, in establishing an aura of normalcy – a “natural” way of operating in daily life – this also becomes a powerful tool for governing oneself and others. A main concern is therefore to critically discuss how the talkative business of learning unfolds in practices beyond formal education.

Keywords: adult learning; discourse; framing; governmentality; lifestyle television

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades the concept of learning has been very much in focus. It extends far beyond formal education and is commonly recognised as lifelong and life-wide (e.g. Biesta, 2013, 2020; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008). A widespread range of learning articulations, vocabularies and

repertoires can be seen apparently transforming everyday practices into pedagogical domains characterised by the similar rationales of teaching, schooling and instruction. Even though assuming multiple shapes, the forming of the self and our need to improve is the focal point, which manifests learning as a mode within and towards life (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 2005). An intriguing aspect, then, is how various practices, activities and identities are linked with learning discourses where, broadly speaking, whatever happens tends to be talked about, categorised and understood in terms of knowledge and skills (Usher & Edwards, 2007). Its adequacy, or a lack of the same, is held to be decisive and depicts a more or less causal relationship between activities and outcomes. A quick look at the media and popular culture easily reveals clear examples of this train of thought:

Especially around Valentine's Day, it's easy to find advice about sustaining a successful marriage, with suggestions for 'date nights' and romantic dinners for two. But as we spend more and more of our lives outside marriage, it's equally important to cultivate the skills of successful singlehood. And doing that doesn't benefit just people who never marry. It can also make for more satisfying marriages.

(Coontz, 2018)

This quotation from *The New York Times* captures precisely how the topic of romantic relationships makes learning a crucial resource, giving the advice "to cultivate the skills of successful singlehood". Whether referring to occasional dating or lifelong marriage, focusing on conduct and working on oneself are portrayed as key features associated with the values "beneficial" and "more satisfying". And – perhaps the more important message – success is seen as achievable for singles as well as couples. Accordingly, it could be said that contemporary social phenomena like dating are informed by discourses of learning.

Moving beyond formal schooling to investigate other teaching and learning sites, it could be argued that popular culture is highly relevant and may have powerful impact on how we come to understand and interact within the world. Aptly captured in the statement "the world, not the school, is the site of teaching" (Pinar, 2010, p. xv), it has been claimed that educational relations exist in the cultural spaces where people spend their everyday lives and can act as a form of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2011; Halliday & Jarvis, 2019; Jarvis, 2016; Sandlin, O'Malley & Burdick, 2011; Sandlin, Wright & Clark, 2013). Bearing this in mind, it is important to contribute to a growing body of

research that recognises, aims to better understand and, not least, critically reads popular culture from the vantage point of educational research in a broad sense (e.g. Jarvis, 2012, 2020; Jubas, Taber & Brown, 2015; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Wright, 2018; Wright & Sandlin, 2017). In and through the implicit or explicit uptake of a pedagogical role, learning is inscribed into popular culture sites, for instance by representing people, relations and social phenomena in specific ways – and not others – or by providing particular knowledge and skills. However, the process of how people create and establish learning as a meaningful way to deal with things is not apparent in itself. Rather it is necessary to emphasise this as an important question for empirical research, which makes the details of *what happens* within popular culture sites a relevant topic.

In this article, I will point out how learning emerges as a particular way to talk in a piece of popular culture by investigating the ways in which people verbalise, negotiate and agree upon learning as a crucial resource. My research focus is on the manifestation of such processes at the micro-level in talk, and I will continue with the topic of romantic relationships. From a pedagogy and discourse angle I will explore dating television by posing the research question: How is learning made relevant in talk on dating practices, and in what ways are subjectivities shaped through such discursive work? To delve into the details, I have selected talk sequences from a television show entitled *Faith, hope and love*,¹ which will be unpacked to illustrate how the interlocutors use a range of communicative resources, such as distinct words, categories and labels, to frame what happens into a learning event. By drawing upon the discursive notions of *governmentality*, *framing* and *positioning*, I will highlight the social dynamics in talk and, also, examine the mechanisms of power that create a certain social order.

2. Lifestyle television through the lens of adult education

Media and popular culture practices appearing in many forms such as television, books, podcasts and magazines, engage people on a daily basis. Scholars have addressed how these practices can have powerful influence on how we think, talk and act, whether we adjust to, negotiate or resist them, which points out how they can operate as sites for adult education and learning (e.g. Jarvis

¹ *Tro, hopp och kärlek*. The show was broadcast by the Swedish Television for three seasons (2015 – 2017) and had about 600 000 – 900 000 viewers (personal communication on audience ratings, 2018).

& Burr, 2011; Jubas, Taber & Brown, 2015; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Wright, 2018; Wright & Sandlin, 2017). It could, for instance, be argued that the media and popular culture offer informal educational opportunities by making particular representations of social phenomena widely available, where people are encouraged to understand and deal with themselves and others in ways displayed through the ideas and ideals flourishing within such sites. Clearly, this stance requires a general shift away from seeing popular culture as merely entertainment or leisure to rather draw attention to its educational role (Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019; Parsemain, 2015). From his vantage point, I will closely examine a dating television show with a particular interest in how learning talk is made relevant in the efforts to attain a good dating practice. However, before delving into the discursive details of exploring talk sequences from dating television I will remark on what connecting popular culture and lifestyle television to adult education research means.

In positioning this study within the research field of adult education, it seems relevant to address the broader phenomenon of learnification (Biesta, 2012, 2013). It has been claimed that contemporary educational discourse and practice is dominated by a particular language of learning that tends to ignore what appears to be key aspects of education such as content, purpose and relationships. The concept works as a critical reminder in depicting how teaching and the teacher seemingly are vanishing, and rather yielding space to a specific language and understanding of educational practices, where what matters is how to facilitate learning, how to create learning opportunities and how to arrange learning spaces. Complex issues about education with its situated, unique and social character in the ongoing living of life are therefore reduced to questions on learning and learners only. Given this widespread discourse, the use of distinct words and metaphors, for example provider, consumer and education market become highly prevalent (Biesta, 2005). Bearing this in mind, learning emerges as a merely individualistic endeavour, whereas the dynamic and contextual aspects of education, and alternatively meaningful ways to speak about and define such practices, become invisible. This illustrates how the dominance of a particular metaphor may endanger multiplicity and diverse understandings (Guilherme & Souza de Freitas, 2018). The discursive shift towards learning, then, tends to turn political and societal challenges into matters of individual adjustment and adaption. People are positioned and position themselves as lifelong and life-wide learners seemingly lacking in some particular skills and competencies, thus engaging in learning activities.

Against this backdrop, “a rapidly growing market for non-formal forms of learning, such as fitness centres, sport clubs, self-help therapy manuals, internet learning, self-instructional video’s, DVD’s and CD’s, etcetera” (Biesta, 2005, p. 57) has been noticed, where the media and popular culture seem preoccupied with portraying themselves as resources for various everyday practices and identities. Invitations to learn are highly prevalent, indeed probably also pervasive, through the use of certain types of rhetoric, tools and techniques not exclusively directed on those who, for instance, participate in a television programme. Instead a message is being sent with a wide reference displaying what are held to be adequate and desirable ways to perform – ways of doing, being and encountering the world. This is not to say that these cultural representations necessarily inform viewers in distinct ways, or even determine behaviour. Rather, I would argue, there is a need to further explore the educational role by focusing on how subjectivities, relations and activities are represented and defined, and critically discuss how they may operate pedagogically.

Insisting that “adults are *learning* worldviews and individual and collective identities through public pedagogies like television” (Wright, 2017, p. 413), one can see that this medium opens for significant opportunities. Clearly integrated with daily life and bearing transformative potential, it may encourage emotional engagement and critical reflection (Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas & Knutson, 2012; Wright, 2013). Within television, the popular reality and lifestyle genre stands out as particularly compelling as it presents a colourful palette of programmes providing ordinary people with ways to improve their everyday lives. Celebrating practical techniques and instructional advice, and perhaps taking the form of a “continual enterprise of self-improvement” (Rose, 1999, p. 93), societal benefits are also expected. Such shows have attracted the attention of various scholars sharing an interest in pedagogical functions and the shaping of selves. For instance, the promotion of consumer lifestyles has been investigated by looking into televised cooking to discuss how audiences may be informed through their engagement in such shows (Quiroga, Sandlin & Wright, 2015). Researchers have also been interested in how some programmes may create versions of reality that seem to reinforce social-class stereotypes, thus masking issues of inequality and restricted democracy (Wright, 2017). Investigations of lifestyle television illustrate the key idea of transformation and “make over” (Ouellette, 2016; Raisborough, 2011), and they also describe how particular narratives, for instance of shame and pride, are at work to convince participants to embrace what is promoted as the more appropriate appearance (Frith, Raisborough & Klein, 2014).

Similar critical readings have been conducted on how makeover television works within a neoliberal and social welfare agenda to govern the self, the family and the home in light of contemporary expectations (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). With a primary interest in uncovering how people shape and foster themselves and others through being judged, guided and taught by “expertise”, researchers have also focused on areas like parenting, for example (e.g. Assarsson Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014).

Taken together, while the general aim of exploring popular culture through the lens of adult education research now seems quite well-established, there still appears to be a call for more and multidisciplinary investigations (e.g. Wright, 2018). The way in which educational processes manifest themselves as discursive work on the micro-level has received less detailed scrutiny, which, nonetheless, seems necessary if we are to achieve a better understanding. It has also been claimed that the discursive features of reality television as a media phenomenon are underexplored (Lorenzo-Dus & Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). Analysing how the interlocutors in a television show negotiate instances of talk – moment by moment – may therefore be a valuable contribution to this field.

3. Analytic perspective, research strategy and data

In this article, I draw upon discursive perspectives and use *governmentality*, *framing* and *positioning* as analytical concepts. The discursive approach positions talk and texts as social practices where the resources that condition and enable them are in focus. The notion of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991, 1997) offers a useful way of highlighting how events, actions and practices create and establish a particular social order that defines and distributes what is considered to be adequate, desirable and preferred – and, also, inadequate or even deviant. By mobilising particular techniques and tactics through which governing operates, people act as governors guiding their conduct and the conduct of others (Foucault, 1993). A key idea, then, is how modes of behaviour are directed and cultivated in accordance with what is held to be “normal” in the practices where people participate.

In giving primacy to how people talk, orient to and mutually coordinate their actions it has been argued that “when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: ‘What is it that’s going on here?’” (Goffman, 1974/1986, p. 8). This has to be dealt with by the participants,

which highlights how crucial co-construction and meaning-making are. The notion of *framing* points to how the construction of events, actions and talk are not given, but rather ascribed certain meaning by the people involved. In social encounters, people jointly decide which activity that takes place, the norms and rules that guide the activity, and how positions get distributed. Frames are seen as important tools for defining the situation, which infers that the interlocutors have to negotiate and establish a shared idea of what they are doing and how to proceed, described as “individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting” (Goffman, 1974/1986, p. 247). In this process catchphrases, buzzwords and telling examples are used as resources to present and deal with a topic in a particular way. Events, actions and utterances are then interpreted within a particular framing that appears to be necessary for the social interaction to become meaningful, which also narrows the available alternatives and guides the decision-making. Framing is not necessarily a straightforward process as clearings, switches and tensions may simultaneously be at work.

Moving beyond the idea of human appearances as essential and pre-defined, the concept of *positioning* rather provides a way to explore selves as discursive constructions emerging in social interaction (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gordon, 2015). Subjectivity is to be understood as decentred and shaped, where dominant patterns are fabricated and re-fabricated, which makes particular subject positions available for demonstrating what one is expected to strive for. Positioning themselves as particular kinds of subjects, people assume and are offered identities that may appear as quite stable, but which also shift within the activity. Hence, identities and relationships are negotiated and co-accomplished in and through the details of social interaction, for instance, by making use of such communicative resources as word choice, voice, tone, emphasis, irony and laughter (Jaffe, 2009). Discursive practices and repertoires also bear specific rights and duties, which reveals a constitutive element when occupying subject positions. However, even though people are encouraged to assume certain positions and fashion themselves as particular selves, the possibility to negotiate and refuse to accept them is always present.

3.1 The data

In the spirit of the discursive framework outlined above, one key idea is to embrace the interactional character of talk, thus shaping normative patterns of conduct and positionings jointly constructed by the participants (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990; Foucault, 1993; Goffman, 1974/1986). This framework provides analytical tools and methodological resources closely related to the epistemological stances taken on the nature of language, identity and social practice, which puts focus on “language in use” or how people do, negotiate and accomplish things in and through language (Gee & Handford, 2012). Following a qualitative methodological design aimed at contributing to better understandings of social life, I have selected one empirical case from which I have picked talk sequences for in-depth analysis. Drawing upon the importance of transparency and self-reflexivity to achieve good quality in qualitative research, I will share some methodological and analytical considerations to make it possible to discern strengths and shortcomings of the study (Tracy, 2010).

The dating show I selected for analysis, entitled *Faith, hope and love*, was broadcast by a Swedish television channel for three seasons, each consisting of about seven one-hour episodes. In emphasising that the participants were priests, vicars and other religious professionals, the show has some similarities with *Farmer wants a wife*, which in Scandinavia bears titles like *Bonde söker fru*, *Jakten på kärligheten* and *Bonde søger brud*. Briefly, the television show has four or five religious professionals who participate with the aim of changing their private lives of singlehood. The participants in the season included in this study were two men and two women between 25 and 50 years of age. The participants are first presented, and people who would like to date any of them are encouraged to write them a letter. The participants then choose whom they want to date, which establishes a small group of people around each participant. Initially they discuss their choices with the host and arrange their dates according to their own preferences. The dating process is then closely followed by a camera, intertwined with comments from each participant and their dates. There are also sequences where the host of the show meets with each participant in a face-to-face talk.

My research interest in closely exploring how learning is made relevant and unfolds in talk sequences from popular culture opens for many possibilities, where the empirical material selected for analysis mainly functions as an illustration. In that sense, the talk sequences could probably have been picked from any other programme in the big corpus of reality and lifestyle television

shows. A quick glance at television any night illustrates plenty of examples on topics like cooking, private finances, house renovation and parenting all strongly suggesting the similar idea of how it takes effort, practice and certain skills to succeed, which illuminates how learning discourses are embedded in popular culture sites. However, since relationships, intimacy and dating clearly appear as hot topics, not least due to people's extensive use of new media technologies to negotiate romantic relationships (e.g. Meenagh, 2015), this seems to be a growing social phenomenon in need of further research to reach better and more specific understandings.

In the present study, the stance taken for close-up analysis of how talk unfolds between the interlocutors necessarily requires selection rather than comprehension. As such, a small selection of empirical data is sufficient for detailed analysis of the discursive features in the context where it is situated. Moreover, there are several reasons why the selected television show on dating seemed particularly interesting; first, the signalling of how the desire for a romantic relationship is a key issue among adults with a wide reference; second, the display of how successful accomplishments of such aspirations sometimes require resources (also provided, for instance, by online dating sites and mobile dating apps); third, the featuring of people that in front of the camera aspire for a lifestyle change defining their future paths and their willingness to elaborate on their struggles to make this happen; fourth, the offering of socially interactive elements through regularly occurring dialogues between the participants and the host of the television show. Finally, in the genre of televised dating some other examples display a main profile on winner-takes-all competition among singles in adventurous environments. Somewhat differently, the programme *Faith, hope and love* rather has an explicit focus on the participants' professional work as a relevant social context thus emphasising everyday life. The fact that the participants are single priests, vicars and other religious professionals, not only suggested in the programme title but also illustrated in snapshots from how they practise their profession, contributes to an interesting dynamic. On the one hand, it seemingly adds a touch of "seriousness" to the programme signalling an ambition to initiate lifelong rather than fleeting romantic relationships. On the other hand, it reveals how these professionals are no different than other professionals, or human beings generally, in how they too struggle to navigate their search for love in an appropriate way.

3.2 The analysis

In the analysis, I watched the seven episodes several times, switching between viewing each episode separately and all of them in a row with the ambition of finding an overall pattern. Giving attention to how interlocutors initiate, create and establish a learning frame in talk to make sense of what happens brought particular aspects that guided the analysis into focus. These aspects may be described as the interlocutors' ways to:

- define, suggest and negotiate activities
- use concepts, naming styles and repertoires
- claim, enter and resist subject positions

While I was working with the empirical material it quickly became clear that the talk sequences where the host of the show met each participant on a one-to-one basis were particularly interesting. Hence, I started to look further into the details of these sequences, watching them repeatedly, taking notes and roughly transcribing the main parts. The analytical process further indicated that the initial encounters, where the interlocutors “set the scene”, provided dialogues on how they negotiate on describing, categorising and dealing with what happens, which made for an even sharper learning contour in the meaning-making process. Rough transcriptions of these dialogues were made before the most relevant sequences were more thoroughly transcribed following a modified convention developed within conversation analysis (see Appendix). When transcribing the data, I encountered some challenges, for instance, overlapping speech, quick turn-takings, interwoven laughing particles, sudden camera movements, cuts and so on. To provide a close-up analysis, I have tried to capture these details while still keeping a reasonable balance with what seems necessary. The excerpts were translated into English, and all the participants have been given pseudonyms.

Finally, I want to momentarily reflect on the usage of reality and lifestyle television as empirical material and address a one or two aspects that may be of particular relevance. Sometimes arguments are made that seemingly imply that these kinds of empirical contexts and data are perhaps a little less interesting than other kinds of contexts and data in educational research. In the spirit of what has been outlined above, I would, however, argue that these are examples of cultural

representations that are highly prevalent and consumed by people in daily life. Within the realm of proffering multidisciplinary approaches, such everyday sites also need to be analysed from the vantage point of adult education. Particularly, it should be noted that reality and lifestyle television, diverse, shifting and blurred genres, seemingly share an interest in everyday life and ordinary people (Raisborough, 2011). The programmes usually include some kind of expertise offering help and support for dealing with challenging situations (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). It could therefore be claimed that pedagogical and didactic elements are already inscribed into these practices, also clearly engaged in sending messages with a wide reference (“the ordinary”). Moreover, the narrative of the “real” (Gordon, 2011) matters in how it infers that the dialogues may be considered intriguing examples of representations expected to comply with cultural understandings of acceptable behaviour. Hence, carefully and critically exploring such sites may offer valuable insights, not least in how social norms and preferences are highlighted through the tools, techniques and guidelines given for how to cultivate actions according to what holds for being adequate in contemporary times.

4. Learning frames in talk on dating practices

The analysis reveals how the interlocutors create and establish a learning frame in talk on dating practices. In face-to-face interactions the participating religious professionals and the host of the television show collaborate on making learning decisive for what is taking place, where, broadly speaking, knowledgeability and skilfulness matter. Within this framing the interlocutors make particular subject positions available through the use of distinctive discursive resources (e.g. words, phrases, examples), invoking them as pedagogical subjects. How the interlocutors build their understandings and negotiate what is found to be important for success will be illuminated in the following three excerpts. In Excerpts 1 and 2, Melvin (host) meets with Anna (participant), and in Excerpt 3 with Adrian (participant).

4.1 “Are you good at dating?”

In Excerpt 1 we will join Anna, who is an approximately 35-year-old divorced mother, in a face-to-face talk with Melvin. Melvin visits Anna at her home, and when he arrives they start to talk about the upcoming date when they are still in the hallway. In a simple question-and-answer format, Melvin states that Anna is going on a date that very evening, which she confirms and to which she

laughingly adds that she finds it all really exciting. Still giggling they approach the sofa in the living room and sit down to a cup of coffee. When we enter the excerpt, Melvin continues to put dating on their talk agenda:

Interlocutors: Melvin (host) and Anna (participant)

Time and place: Episode 1, at Anna's place

- 1 Melvin But are you, are you good at dating?
- 2 (2.0)
- 3 Anna Ehm:: (0.6) na::eh, well good, >I think I'm rather good at meeting people<
- 4 generally=
- 5 Melvin =Mm
- 6 Anna >I think<
- 7 Melvin >But you're not used to meeting people< (0.2) with the thought (0.5) in mind 'is it
- 8 you and me who will [spend our life together?' [no hehe
- 9 Anna [hehe 'will spend the rest of our lives together?' he[he no:: hehe
- 10 of course not, hehe no of course =
- 11 Melvin = ((smiling)) No that's quite unusual =
- 12 Anna = ((smiling)) That's obviously a great difference

The sequence begins with Melvin framing the activity by asking “are you good at dating?” (line 1), which promotes the idea of adequate conduct as a key concern. In this way he also claims self-assessment from Anna on this matter. After a pause, Anna responds as she carefully confirms this as a possible fact. The question is dealt with as an acceptable starting point, focusing on how to assess her experience and performance with dating so far. Yet, Anna immediately changes her mind and rather claims that she is confident in “meeting people generally” (lines 3-4). Melvin confirms Anna's correction somewhat and encourages her to continue, and she then offers the reservation “>I think<” (line 6) which opens for the possibility to discuss the matter in more detail.

In the next turn Melvin negotiates Anna's response as he challenges her stance and requests a different answer. Contextualising the dialogue into the immediate dating situation he states “>but you're not used to meeting people< (0.2) with the thought (0.5) in mind 'is it you and me who will

In the sequence Melvin gives Anna what appears to be a relevant task; to prepare herself and to stress some useful knowledge, something which he also breaks down into smaller parts. In asking “well, but what do we know, what do we know about the man we’re going to meet” (line 1), he redirects focus away from Anna herself to her upcoming date, making this the valid focal point. Dating other people involves being prepared by finding out more about them, and this is considered an adequate way to approach the situation. The task is initially formulated as a collective action where Melvin at first includes himself in the process, however, in the next step he corrects himself by changing pronouns, saying “that you are going to meet”, emphasising that it is in fact Anna who is going on the date, not him (line 4). As such, Anna is clearly positioned as the target person invited to appear as knowledgeable.

Laughingly, Anna confirms that she is definitely the one going on the date, but also admits that she, “to be honest”, does not know so much about her date (line 6). Immediately, however, she adjusts to the requirement from Melvin by nevertheless sharing what she knows so far: “his name is Steven, here he is, he’s (0.2) from Stockho::lm and he’s 39 ye:ars old” (lines 6-7). Melvin responds to this by confirming Anna’s actions as reasonable and expands her way of simply delivering facts by adding that her upcoming date seems to be an adequate choice for her, “I think he looks kind” (line 8). In the next turn, by stating “>yes< absolutely” (line 9) Anna uses an intensifier displaying that they have reached a mutual understanding of the situation, and clearly agree on this matter.

4.3 “Did you practise this?”

In Excerpt 3, we will meet the participant Adrian, who is about 40 years old and has never been in a serious romantic relationship, in a face-to-face talk with Melvin. Melvin visits Adrian at his home, and after taking a quick look around the apartment they sit down on a sofa in the living room. When we enter the excerpt, Melvin follows up a previous conversation and connects learning to dating through the topic of flirting:

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Interlocutors: Melvin (host) and Adrian (participant)

Time and place: Episode 1, at Adrian's place

- 1 Melvin We talked a little bit about this earlier (0.2) learning how like to flirt and=
2 Adrian = Uhum =
3 Melvin = Did you (0.3) practise this?
4 Adrian No I have not (.) ehm (0.2) hm (0.3) right now I only have this thought I'll stay open
5 and just like (.) get to know and
6 (1.0)
7 Melvin Uhm? ((looking doubtful))
8 Adrian Perhaps not exactly start to flirt
9 (5.0)
10 I'm not sure how how far into the date >well you probably notice< [when you can start
11 Melvin [>But but but< well
12 to flirt well you're not going to like touch her [tits not that
13 Adrian [No::h hehehehe
14 Melvin >But but but I think more of < well giving signals hehe
15 Adrian That's it I like both Japan and Germany so my way of showing love that's "well I have
16 a nice time-schedule here (0.2) [on things we're going to do" then I show
17 Melvin [hehe hehe hehe hehe hehe without
18 being an expert I'm certain of (0.2) that many women won't automatically interpret
19 your love hehe as coming out of a time-schedule hehe
20 Adrian ((smiling)) Ah that's it, you're (right) again the big hehe big hehe insight of the day for
21 me

In the sequence Melvin starts out by referring to how they have already "talked a little bit about this earlier (0.2) learning how like to flirt", something Adrian somewhat confirms (lines 1-2). This way of making sense of what is going on positions Adrian as someone who is less experienced and in need of training to improve, which makes it possible to orient to the situation in terms of instruction. Melvin asks about a particular task that Adrian was expected to have been working on prior to their talk. Making this a joint focus of attention, Melvin follows it up by explicitly asking if Adrian has "practised this" (line 3) which he clearly denies, "no I have not" (line 4). Yet, by being held accountable and able to provide an answer, Adrian offers an account of how he rather plans

to approach the upcoming situation from another angle which is by “staying open” and trying to “get to know” the person he is dating (lines 4-5). Seemingly Melvin does not agree, and Adrian tries to adjust his stance as he says “perhaps not exactly start to flirt” (line 8). Then there is a longer pause in the dialogue.

In negotiating flirting as an activity not necessary for successful dating, Adrian then continues to talk. He reveals some confidence in what is going to happen, which produces an alternative frame that dismisses practising. However, Adrian also admits to his lack of knowledge “I’m not sure how far into the date” (line 10), yet rather than dealing with flirting as a question of practising he turns it into a question of correct timing. Vaguely Adrian once again claims some kind of knowledgeability as he expects to find this out during the date: “>well you probably notice when you can start” (line 10). Melvin, however, evaluates the displayed stance on how to approach dating as troublesome, which the pause indicates. He confronts Adrian with what he thinks is a misinterpretation of what flirting is really about. Melvin explains by making distinctions between flirting and other activities: “well to flirt well you’re not going to like touch her tits not that” (lines 11-12). Melvin’s example illustrates a sharp contrast, and perhaps a little embarrassed Adrian giggles and starts to negotiate his previous stance as invalid: “no::h hehehehe” (line 13). Thus, Adrian makes a move and takes a somewhat different position than before, now appearing as quite willing to listen and learn.

In the next turn Melvin clarifies what he was saying and claims that flirting rather is about playing an active role, being well-prepared and knowing how to do things. The suggestion “more of well giving signals hehe” (line 14) appears to be taken-for-granted advice since this is not developed further. Adrian reacts positively to Melvin’s advice and says “that’s it” (line 15), and in an attempt to act as familiar with what “signalling” in fact means he enthusiastically reveals his idea that it is about creating “a nice time-schedule” for the activities he and his date are going to engage in (line 16). By drawing upon his favourite countries, often stereotyped by the idea of order and structure, Adrian also displays himself as knowledgeable.

In a low and friendly voice, however, Melvin continues to question Adrian’s dating conduct by frankly evaluating this idea as more or less irrelevant. Rather than agreeing, Melvin smilingly states

that “many women won’t automatically interpret your love hehe as coming out of a time-schedule”. Even though he makes a reservation, that he is not to be seen as an authority, “without being an expert”, Melvin still displays himself as “certain” on this point (lines 17-19). Adrian responds by revealing that he suddenly understands what Melvin is saying and recognises this as relevant knowledge, thus finding that the proffered advice is very useful. Adrian chuckles and repeats himself, “ah that’s it, you’re (right) again the big hehe big hehe insight of the day for me” (lines 20-21), which reveals that he is eager to adjust to the position where being well-prepared through practising seems necessary. He adds that what just happened is a recognisable pattern in their talks, which makes it possible for Adrian to orient to Melvin as knowledgeable; he delivers trustworthy and valuable advice. Adrian joins Melvin in his laughter, displaying that they share their understanding of how to approach the dating practice adequately.

5. Discussion

In this article I have explored talk sequences in a dating television show through the lens of adult education. From this vantage point the aim has been to elucidate how learning discourses are at work and unfold in popular culture, thus making particular rationales, roles and relations relevant – and not others. Even though research on the intersection of popular culture and adult education is well-established (e.g. Jarvis, 2020; Jubas, Taber & Brown, 2015; Sandlin, Wright & Clark, 2013; Wright, 2018), the discursive work carried out in the immediate interactive situation calls for further exploration. The concepts *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991), *framing* (Goffman, 1974/1986) and *positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1990) enabled me to undertake a close-up analysis of social encounters and to highlight the detailed articulations, vocabularies and repertoires of learning. In focusing on the social dynamics and what happens in talk – the ways in which people transform encounters into learning events – the article can be a valuable contribution to this body of knowledge. Taking my point of departure in the analysis of one empirical part of popular culture and putting it under the magnifying glass, in this final section I will use the dating example to discuss and problematise the potential workings and effects of such powerful discourses.

Drawing on the analysis it may, on a meta-level, be argued that the key issue I have addressed in this article moves far beyond the dating case to rather reveal ubiquitous governing modes and techniques (Foucault, 1991, 1997). In all walks of life people encounter expectations and claims for

learning, and this is usually portrayed as good, adequate and desirable (e.g. Biesta, 2013). There is a general appeal played out for everyone and no one – the necessity of learning for future success. Ultimately, “everything” is displayed as a matter of practising, improving and cultivating skills, which emphasises pedagogy and targets adults as learning subjects. The recurrent calls for monitoring and optimising skills through learning appear to be a hegemonic idea(l) shaping and fostering specific subjectivities. The portrayal rests heavily on the individual, where the legitimate way to deal with difficulties is to make some effort, improve and succeed, and at the same time tends to depict reasons for failure as a lack of will to learn or just poor effort. In appearing as an almost “natural” way of operating in all walks of life, it symbolically teaches people how to govern themselves and others through particular technologies and techniques (Foucault, 1993).

However, the close-up analysis of televised dating offers an illustration, on a micro-level, of *how* the interlocutors activate themselves to produce and reproduce rationales for learning in social and situated practice. In focusing on the detailed use of distinct words, phrases and activities that may be associated with learning discourses, the data reveals how the mechanisms of knowledgeable and skilfulness come to dominate the dialogue, which puts the novice positioning front and centre. Hence, the interlocutors initiate, create and establish a particular frame in talk that makes the social interaction meaningful in this particular way (Goffman, 1974/1986). Within this agreed social space, individual performance and conduct are in focus and certain guidelines for how to preferably act, improve and succeed are provided. In this portrayal there is no doubt that people’s capability, the need to make effort, and the challenging – yet possible to overcome – situation are crucial elements. Such ways of defining, attributing and coding what matters quite easily turns whatever may arise into a learning topic that promotes practising. Hence, the person who willingly accepts such claims also fashions “the successful single”, whom in the practice of dating is not necessarily the one ending up with a partner but is rather linked to the learner subjectivity engaged in cultivating particular skills.

The established learning template allows for, or even claims that the interlocutors position themselves as pedagogical subjects negotiating what is held to be adequate and inadequate. In making self-assessment on dating practices a relevant starting point, the emerging dialogue and process attend to the ways in which these practices may be improved. The subject positions made available

and taken up as the conversation unfolds (Davies & Harré, 1990) illustrate epistemic asymmetries, role asymmetries and interactional implications. A key feature appearing as a powerful discursive resource in all three excerpts is the question-and-answer format (“*Are you good at dating?*”, “*Well, but what do we know?*” and “*Did you practise this?*”) revealing how someone is given and assumes the authority to pose questions whilst someone else is expected to provide answers. Even though the questioner may be put in the position of persistently influencing and defining the talk, it should also be noted that this has to be accepted or reified interactionally by the answerer (Thornborrow, 2001). Such dynamics are important in turning the conversation into a pedagogical event, invoking the newcomer and the facilitator, respectively, assigning specific rights and duties and dealing with what happens as an educative process that draws upon the adults’ own lives as learning contexts.

In the lifestyle television genre, a particular domain of “expertise” has emerged, giving instructions, offering “handy tips” and delivering special insights on specific matters with reference to what is accepted as adequate (Ouellette, 2016; Raisborough, 2011). It should, however, be noted that the interactive pattern between the host and the participants in the selected dating show also appears to be dominated by a discourse of “niceness”, displaying what appears to be honest curiosity, support and humour. Moreover, there is a tendency to further downgrade the image of the expert just aiming at “skilling up” the participants on dating matters in the way the host rather assumes a friendly role of collaboration and sharing by posing open questions, inviting the participants to reveal their lived experiences and encouraging them to make their own decisions. In using an explorative rather than a questioning approach – which, however, does not exclude a critical gaze – the tone and style clearly differ from similar shows that may appear to be closer to spectacularising and impoliteness (Frith, Raisborough & Klein, 2014; Lorenzo-Dus & Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). Thus, what appears to be a qualified “friend” does not rule out the mechanisms that shape and foster particular subjects (Foucault, 1993, 1997). In the process of transforming selves, the advice given is confirmed as credible – perhaps even foolish to ignore – which promotes the idea of learning as necessary to achieve the desirable goal. Power still operates in and through discursive resources reinforcing asymmetries in knowledgeability which, despite the initially mundane or “lay” expressions, nevertheless reveals expertise in some sense.

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From a slightly different angle, there are perhaps some promising lessons to learn from the case of televised dating that may be transferred to other contexts and identities. Bearing in mind that pedagogy may be seen as a performative practice not necessarily exclusive for what goes on in formal education a significant element is rather the emerging social interactions and potential conversations across multiple cultural sites. Against this backdrop the idea of critical pedagogy has been suggested, emphasising the cruciality to offer participants debates and dialogues linked to social problems, agency, change and civic matters (e.g. Giroux, 2004; Giroux & Giroux Searls, 2006). Social, economic and political justice are of main concern, giving prominence to how ethics and democracy have unquestionable relevance in people's everyday lives. Considering this train of thought there may be reason to point out – yet mindfully – that the example from dating reveals a main message. In and through a critical, yet supportive, dialogue people's various experiences, pre-assumptions and established ways of thinking and acting are acknowledged, but also challenged by alternative perspectives. The participants engage with problems that are meaningful to them, and they are encouraged to cultivate new lifestyles. This is done in a conversational manner that signals respect and honesty with a touch of humour. Knowledgeability, skills and performance rule out personality, and a complex web of such emotions as engagement, confidence, risk-taking, doubt, happiness and courage is intertwined with desires for change. How to face unfamiliar situations and how to cope with difficult circumstances, as illustrated in this particular case, may inspire and work educationally, and thus inherit transformative potential (Jarvis & Burr, 2011).

The rationales of learning, then, depict the cruciality of self-improvement, which may well empower and enrich the lives of diverse adults. In and through the recurrent use of distinct words, phrases and activities that may be associated with learning discourses, particular subjectivities are shaped, putting knowledgeability front and centre. Such aspects of human life are dynamic and clearly distinct from, for instance, stable personal traits or even fate, and promote a lifestyle change where people are encouraged to engage and make progress. Access is given to practices making certain knowledge and skills available as opposed to covering up for problems, blind-spots and shortcomings, or being stuck with unwanted situations that impede people's life journeys. From that stance it could be argued that what the dating example represents is not merely a question of settling down and finding the love of one's life, but it also points out what is possible for women and men in similar, yet still various, life situations.

All in all, the portrayal of the process of change – from being single persons who are not dating into becoming single persons who are dating – may enable adults to feel better equipped for contemporary society and, also, alternative lifestyles. Popular culture may therefore potentially be resourceful in constructing identities that are recognisable and linked with particular groups or settings in greater society, and as such offer fruitful ways for inscribing new realities into peoples' lives (e.g. Jarvis, 2020; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019; Wright, 2018). At the same time, however, various social sites and interests intersect and promote learning as unquestionable for attaining more well-functioning and happier lives, which easily transforms preferences into truths and diversity into uniformity. Hence, there is still reason to critically examine and try to destabilise the dominant rationale of contemporary times from endlessly finding its way into our everyday practices.

6. Conclusion

This article discusses the emergence of learning discourses that may be noticed within and across the media and popular culture. Drawing on perspectives attending to the conversational features in social encounters, I have explored the issue of dating portrayed in a television show. The close-up analysis has captured how a learning frame is constructed in and through talk sequences on dating practices, where a crucial aspect is to create and claim the novice positioning – a subjectivity shaped through the discursive work of distinct vocabularies and articulations which tend to define and explain whatever may arise through the lens of knowledgeability and skilfulness. Practising with the aim of developing a particular set of skills becomes a highly valued activity and inevitable resource that people need to access if they are to achieve success. In highlighting such dynamics, a main focus is *how* the learning frame gets established. This is not necessarily the consequence of a single initiative, question or response but rather something the interlocutors collaborate on through a course of social interaction. In negotiating, agreeing upon and contributing to this particular frame the interlocutors are invoked as pedagogical subjects where cultivating adequate knowledge and skills and providing meaningful support are crucial. Undoubtedly everyday challenges are displayed as manageable, encouraging people to engage in learning and independently shape opportunities that are not given *per se*.

However, to produce and reproduce the same rationale of learning obviously held to be an inevitable “truth” discloses the power relations at work – and the workings of power relations – constantly targeting people as learning subjects. To move beyond formal adult education, then, and investigate popular culture sites such as reality and lifestyle television with the aim of exploring, but also critically reading and deconstructing them, is therefore crucial. From the vantage point of educational research, the wide display of social phenomena that characterises the media and popular culture are still underexplored, and there is more work to be done on how adults receive, negotiate and learn from such encounters. Thus, it is just as important to look further into the popular culture images and representations that constantly surround us in everyday life. In considering the media and popular culture as some form of educational opportunity its performative nature may preferably be the focal point. Furthermore, a stronger focus on the discursive work undertaken by the participants – how they do, negotiate and accomplish things in and through talk – has the potential of capturing telling examples from encounters across a range of sites that may be acknowledged and discussed. In an era characterised by a widespread language of learning it seems necessary to continue to unpack its articulations, vocabularies and repertoires through rigorous empirical research.

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Appendix: Transcript conventions

Symbol	Meaning
?	Inquiring intonation
=	Contiguous utterances
(.)	Dot indicates a pause of less than 0.2 seconds. Number in the parentheses indicate the length of the pause
:	Prolongation of preceding vowel
<u>Word</u>	Underlined means stressed word (or part of it)
W[ord	Brackets indicate the onset of overlapping speech
[Word	
>Word<	Right/left carats indicate that the talk between the interlocutors is speeded up
((laughing))	Comments made by the researcher
Hehe	Laughter particles