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The narratives of a multicultural classroom

A writing project and its unexpected outcome

The subject of Danish Language and Literature has a central position in creating an access to cultural tools so that the students can see their lives and their own position in a wider and more reflective perspective. For that reason it is of the utmost importance that central insights in language and literature form a never-ending dialogue in the student's mind. The starting point may be that the teacher recognizes the students' potentials in all the varieties that might be found in a classroom, and that the students are supported in working in their own pace and gradually change and develop their learning conceptions, learning strategies and personal insight.

The first aim of the study which is presented in this article was to investigate the distribution of learning conceptions in a particular class. The second aim was to investigate how interpretive reading skills and literary understanding might be enhanced through narrative writing tasks in a multicultural classroom in the first year of Danish upper secondary school.

The majority of students were children of migrant workers in Denmark. The few students with a Danish origin all come from backgrounds with a limited tradition for reading fiction.

As the article will show, the study took a surprising turn, and lead to unexpected conclusions.

The Study

The study design consisted of:

- Classroom observations over three weeks.
- A teacher interview.

- A student questionnaire with open questions on learning and reading.
- Implementation of initial narrative writing tasks before literature reading.

The research method is a *phenomenographic analysis* of students' and teachers' conceptions of learning.

The study provided thought-provoking insight into the stressful and burdened life of young immigrants in the Danish upper secondary education. This insight added an important aspect to the study.

Different aspects of the class in question

The school where this study took place is a school situated in the suburbs of a big city. Over the years the students of the school have changed, and for various reasons the majority of the students are now young people from immigrant families.

The students in the class in question provided quite a lot of problems for their teachers. There were internal conflicts, students were being mobbed, and it seemed as if a lot of troublemakers were concentrated in this particular class. Students from the class had put detergent in the school aquarium, and the fish died. Some students did not like the biology teacher and decided to smear brown soap on the floor outside the biology class in order to make the teacher slip. There were several incidents of fights among the boys in the class.

A group of students (boys and girls) were silent and kept to themselves, whereas others were boisterous and challenging. There were many tensions across the groups.

The head master had had talks with individual students and their parents on various occasions. In several cases these talks had serious consequences for the individual student as the parents punished them for not being well behaved at school. The tendency was that the parents' ambitions on their child's behalf were that the child should be a success, have a good education and do well in the Danish society. These ambitions seemed to be a heavy load on many of the students, and in many cases fear of reproaches and punishment were part of the students' everyday school life. All in all the students were troubled with many conflicting demands, and their reactions troubled the teachers and the school as such.

Different approaches to learning

One of the areas that created difficulties for the students in question was the fact that their conceptions of learning did not correlate with the more demanding aspects of upper secondary school. To learn parts of a subject by heart is an important part

of being a student, but as the work in upper secondary progresses, it is not sufficient. The student will have to develop metacognitive skills and a basic understanding of complex connecting contexts. This situation was not acknowledged by the majority of the students. This is not surprising as this particular aspect of teaching and learning is seldom investigated. Research in this area has mainly been carried out within phenomenographic research. This research was started in the late seventies by Ference Marton and Roger Säljö at Gothenburg University (Marton 1979; Säljö 1979 a) (Säljö 1979 b) (Säljö 1979 c). Phenomenographic research investigates the variation of conceptions within particular areas. The purpose of this research was to describe different learners' learning conceptions. A learning conception is defined as a cluster of interrelated beliefs about different aspects of learning. At the home page

<http://www.ped.gu.se/biorn/phgraph/welcome.html>

it is possible to explore this research area further.

The majority of the class in this study demonstrated an unsophisticated learning conception. The categories of learning conceptions are developed by the phenomenographic research mentioned above (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty 1993; Biggs 1987; Marton and Booth 1997). This research deals with six categories of learning conceptions. The three first conceptions are:

To learn is

- to get more knowledge into your head
- to remember
- to be able to use the knowledge

Students with any of these conceptions of learning may be students from non-reading backgrounds who feel insecure and ill at ease when starting in upper secondary school, especially in humanistic, interpretive subjects compared to the more exact subjects. A student like this will often say: *Just write on the blackboard what I'm supposed to say at my exam*, i.e. they are *Certainty Orientated* as opposed to *Uncertainty Orientated* in their study approach (Huber et al. 1992).

The three next conceptions are categorized like this:

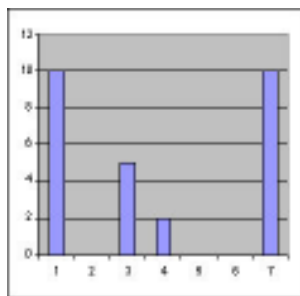
To learn is

- to understand
- to change one's knowledge i.e. to integrate new knowledge
- to change as a person.

Students with any of these latter conceptions of learning would typically be probing, investigative, uncertainty orientated students who want to understand the fundamental ideas of the subject. This student would typically want to do project based, decentralised work which would challenge habitual thinking and enhance individual development.

In the class in question the distribution of learning conceptions turned out to be as depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1. Learning conceptions



1. Learning Conception 1: *to get more knowledge*
2. Learning Conception 2: *to remember*
3. Learning Conception 3: *to be able to use*
4. Learning Conception 4: *to understand*
5. Learning Conception 5: *to change one's knowledge*
6. Learning Conception 6: *to change as a person*
7. To get a good future – to be a success

Ten students demonstrate a restricted learning conception, as they define learning as an accumulation of facts put into their heads by a teacher or a book. They typically read things again and again until they know it by heart. This learning conception puts great demands on the teacher, as he or she is often considered the one who is responsible for the learning that takes place in class.

Five students write that if one can use knowledge for school purposes, one has learnt the material. They demonstrate what you might call a functional learning conception. Two students write that they have learnt the material if they can *understand* it. They demonstrate a developmental learning conception. (Klatter et al. 2001).

In writing that one has learnt something when one is able to understand, the student's focus has shifted. It is no longer a question about the teacher being able to put knowledge into the heads of the students – it is a question of the student

being able to combine the new knowledge with what he or she already knows in order to build a new understanding.

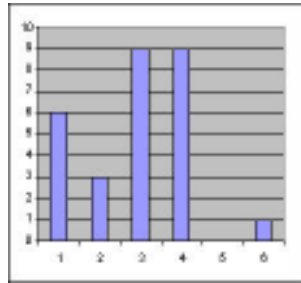
Apart from the above mentioned observations it is very interesting that no less than ten students do not really clarify their conceptions of learning, they see learning from another angle and write statements like: *learning means to get a good future, to build a good future, to become a success, to get a job*. I have made this small scale research in many Danish classrooms, and I have never received that category of answers before. The answers might be an indication that it is stressful to be a young immigrant in a country that has not yet accepted you to the full, but is still waiting to see if you will manage just like your hopeful and expectant parents are waiting for you to become a success.

The Danish education system and its values are based on the concept of Bildung. K. P. Mortensen defines it like this: *The concept of Bildung rests on assumptions that can advantageously be brought into play with contemporary developmental theories. This is above all true of Bildung being conceived as an identity shaping (individual) activity and of the underlying idea that Bildung – both as supraindividual creation of culture and as personal development of identity is inextricably bound up with man's reflective faculties and thus with self examination and self transcendence.* (Mortensen 2002)

Subsequently, a reflective and individual behaviour (and a developmental learning conception) is rewarded within the educational frame.

A big percentage of the young people in this study are not able to satisfy these demands, and furthermore – they are not able to identify the demands either. They carry the load that they have to be successful partly without knowing how to meet the requirements. Their learning conceptions are primarily restricted or functional, and they are not able to analyse the learning situation, let alone change the conditions.

When you ask a Danish average¹ class in the first year of upper secondary school to write about their conceptions of learning you would get statements like the ones in Figure 2 (page 82).

Figure 2. An average class

1. Learning Conception 1: *to get more knowledge*
2. Learning Conception 2: *to remember*
3. Learning Conception 3: *to be able to use*
4. Learning Conception 4: *to understand*
5. Learning Conception 5: *to change one's knowledge*
6. Learning Conception 6: *to change as a person*

The distribution of answers in this class is more even, and it is likely that the students will challenge each other (and the teacher) as approximately one third want to *understand* the material. Furthermore, the students with learning conception 1-3 are likely to change gradually through exchanges with and challenges from teacher and fellow students in a dialogic classroom.

The distribution of learning conceptions in the research class was surprising and thought-provoking.

The other remarkable conclusion to this investigation was that the study gave an unexpected insight into how inexperienced readers with unsophisticated learning conceptions may benefit from narrative writing tasks.

Writing tasks and interpretation skills

The students in the class in this study were going to read a novel by a young Danish author, and as a prelude to that they were asked to write their own story, inspired by the 'story wheel method'². This method gives insights into the elements of a story as the students write before they read. The writing session lasted 90 minutes:

- Where does the story take place? Use your senses, think of a location outside or inside. What does it look like? Smell, view, sounds etc.
- When? What time of the day, and of the year? Light, darkness, weather?
- Who? Three people are present, who are they? Age, looks, characteristics?
- What? Choose a theme, for example love, revenge, money and design a conflict
- The climax. Write the main scene in your story

The idea was that the students should all contemplate how to write a precise description of a place, of an atmosphere, of a person, of a conflict, and they should all consider - by doing it themselves - what made a piece of text work. This knowledge should make them better readers when they were going to read and analyse the novel in question. They were asked to write along the lines of *don't tell it, show it* - and were given some short examples and exercises before they started on their own.

All the students seemed to like the task, and everybody wrote with enthusiasm after a few minutes of talk and questions.

To my surprise the majority of the stories that the students wrote were filled with dread and anxiety. Some stories were not unlike **nightmares** (two boys and two girls). In one, for example, two brothers are on their way to the hospital where their sister is giving birth. Their car breaks down, the bus is delayed, no bike in sight. Finally, they manage to get there, and they are told that the baby had survived, but that their sister died. The narrator passes out.

In the story the two brothers are unable to act, whatever they do, they are blocked in their efforts.

In another story, two friends (girls) are going to have a cosy evening together. They are having a nice time arranging sweets and deciding what film to watch. One girl leaves the room to get something, and suddenly the other girl hears a strange sound, and realises that the friend's mother who has been lost for months is lying next door almost beaten to death. The horror is immense, and the story ends unresolved.

An apparently uncomplicated and nice situation turns out to be filled with dread just under the surface.

Another theme is **identity crisis** (four girls). Several students write about feeling like a Dane, but not looking like one and not being treated like one in the Danish society, or looking like a Pakistani girl, being treated like one but not feeling like one while visiting their families in Pakistan.

Or the narrators are **criminals** (three girls). They committed a crime, they were discovered and now they are in danger.

Another group of stories deals with **amnesia** (two boys, one girl). The narrators are caught in terrible dark places. They do not know how they got there. There is a strange smell. There is something on the floor - sticky, thick - blood? There is an unintelligible, incomprehensible sound nearby etc. etc. The descriptions are filled with dread and disorientation.

Illness is another topic. The narrators (three girls) have just been told that they are mortally ill, and that they are going to die soon. They feel sad and are afraid to tell their parents. They have to carry the burden themselves.

To sum up the protagonists feel unable to act, they feel that beneath every (however apparently nice) situation, a danger may be hidden. Nothing is what it seems to be. They are disorientated and carrying terrible secrets.

Some of the stories were read aloud in class to demonstrate the stylistic and linguistic qualities of the texts, and at some point a student pointed out that they all seemed to deal with fear. Another student commented on that: *No wonder, most people are afraid most of the time, aren't they?* Nobody contradicted him.

The fearful themes of the stories may well be an image of how these young immigrants experience their situation in Denmark and in the Danish school system. The subject of Danish literature is difficult to cope with for a young immigrant, as all national literature refers to cultural and historically based conventions, and this area is difficult to navigate in if you belong to another cultural background.

After the writing session, the class read and interpreted the novel mentioned above. They returned to their writing experience while interpreting the text and comments like this were heard in class: *This person does not come alive, there are many details missing or the place does not seem real - why are we not told about ...? - etc., etc.*

No doubt the students had become more alert readers through their own personal writing task, and it was interesting that all the students were potentially good writers.

Furthermore their appetite for reading and understanding a text was enhanced through the fact that they had been allowed to write about their own anxiety. The interest in this (short, but promising) project was extensive across learning conceptions and reading backgrounds in the class, and it turned out that the writing task functioned as a motivational reading and interpretation factor in this case and revealed potentials in a class which was malfunctioning in many ways and predominantly ill at ease with language tasks and literature reading.

Two factors may have played an important role in the students' motivational change - firstly their feeling of ownership - they owned their stories, which were personal and important to them - and secondly their success as writers. It was obvious that these short texts had poignant traits and were as a whole well written, and that gave the individual student a feeling that for once he or she understood a little bit of what this complex and difficult subject was all about.

Teachers of classes consisting of students as the above mentioned face a difficult task, as they have to get to know the potentials and challenges of each particular student in order to establish a fruitful collaboration.

So where do we go from here?

In the subject of Danish Language and Literature in Danish upper secondary education the ideal is to be able to educate young readers to enjoy reading literature, and to develop a critical reading competence among the young readers. These demands are closely connected to the Danish way of thinking and framing education and cultural ideals. These underlying demands often create a feeling of exhaustion and lack of energy in many young inexperienced readers, and among them many young immigrants, or sons and daughters of immigrants, as they are not able to understand the exact demands in the subject.

In addition to that, many students with a foreign ethnic background tend to think that education is the only access to success and stability in the country they inhabit, so they work hard to fulfil the demands. It seems to them (and their parents) to be a safe way out of marginalisation. It is often hard for them to get through an education, and the subject of Danish Language and Literature is often the most difficult of all. The combination of ambition, challenges and the feeling of defeat creates a powerful and dangerous cocktail.

The relevance of studying these areas may be found in the fact that despite the change in student uptake in upper secondary education in Denmark, the number of students from families with little formal education who obtains a university degree has not changed radically. (Hansen 1995). The reasons for this are multiple. One possible reason is that these young people do not get access to cultural codes (Bruner 1998).

In this study all the students in the class had a moment of authenticity³ through writing stories that depicted important dilemmas in their lives. A teaching strategy that could regularly create similar authentic learning situations might gradually change the students' learning conceptions and learning strategies and through that a metacognitive preparedness that could lead to a feeling of control of the situation.

The area is important for political, sociological and humanistic reasons, and it is my hope that this article will give rise to discussion.

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Notes

- 1 The numbers are based on numerous investigations in the first year of upper secondary classes.
- 2 For further inspiration see: <http://www.newi.ac.uk/englishresources/workunits/ks3/genre/storywheelall.html>.
- 3 For further definition of the concept of authenticity, see: CUYPERS, STEFAAN E. HAJI, ISHTIYAQUE: Authentic Education and Moral Responsibility. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Volume 24, Number 1, February 2007 , pp. 78-94(17).



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