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Presentation: To listen with your body

Abstract

This is the (slightly revised) english summery attatched in the dissertation *Att kunna lyssna med kroppen. En studie av gestaltande förmåga inom gymnasieskolans estetiska program, inriktning teater* (Ahlstrand 2014). The full version of the dissertation can be read online.

Background

Knowledge in Theatre has traditionally been acquired within a master-apprentice tradition (Johansson 2012, Järleby 2003) where knowing was continually developed and transformed through practice (cf. *community of practise*, Lave & Wenger 1991). Today theatre as an art form is studied and taught in Sweden at national institutions for higher education in the arts of film, radio, television and theatre with BA and MA programs and courses. Still there are some traces from the master-apprentice tradition, for example when actor students as part of their education have placements at professional theatres.

Theatre has been a school subject in the upper secondary school's national arts program in Sweden since 1992 and has its own syllabus and grading criteria. When theatre becomes a subject in upper secondary school it is transformed, through a didactic transposition (Chevallard 2005). In other words, when the art form becomes a school subject the conditions of the art form change. Teaching now takes place in a classroom and not by participating in professional theatre activities. To meet the school's requirements for planning teaching activities with colleagues as well as assessing and giving feedback to students, theatre knowledge needs to be articulated.

The previous two curriculum reforms in Sweden have developed competency-based syllabuses. There is an emphasis on certain ways of knowing to be developed; teaching is described as something that aims to develop subject-specific capabilities. *Stage performance*[1] (acting) is a central part of the school syllabus for theatre and is supposed to lead to the development of *performative capability*, which is the focus of my dissertation.

There are different views on how to teach theatre in schools, Hornbrook (1991) for example repudiates the view that one should not affect the students' creativity, but rather let them create intuitively from their own sense of what is right. He argues that theatre, in the same way as other Arts, has its roots in a rational, social behaviour, and he chooses to downplay the psychological aspects such as the existence of creative and aesthetic sides of the individual that just need to be nourished in order to flourish. Bailin (1998) also discusses how knowledge and skills in theatre as a subject are prerequisites for being able to be creative and innovative. Bailin questions the idea of creativity being essentially a free activity and points out, that some drama and theatre teachers tend to work from a romantic idea of free creativity, e.g. such as improvising without any limits or rules to relate to.

It is in the creative process itself that the teacher makes both educational and aesthetic evaluations, choices and assessments, which are all more or less explicit. The challenge is to try to articulate the basis for these choices, judgements and evaluations which of necessity take place in a didactic practice. In order to do this one needs to determine and explore what subject-specific theatre knowledge actually means and what is particular for a *performative capability*.

Research in the field of assessment in Sweden shows that teachers in all subjects often fall into difficulties when they are required to articulate knowledge in relation to giving assessments and feedback (Korp 2006; Skolinspektionen 2010; Skolverket 2010a, 2010b; Tholin 2006; Zandén 2010). This suggests that subject-specific knowing is an unexplored area in many school subjects. The tacit dimension of knowledge has been brought to attention by assessment researchers, which further complicate the issues (Price & Rust 1999, O'Donovan et al. 2001; Freeman & Lewis 1998, Webster et al. 2000). For example, some research

shows that even if teachers try to articulate and specify assessment criteria, the student does not always easily understand these criteria; also teachers have a tendency to evaluate student accomplishments differently (Sadler 2012). Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of how to approach issues of assessment in the educational context. It is only by engaging with the tacit dimension of knowledge that we can better develop our understanding of what such knowing actually consists of.

Research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse subject-specific capabilities in theatre education at upper secondary schools in Sweden. The research questions are formulated as follows:

How can we recognise knowledge within theatre education in upper secondary schools, specifically the meaning of knowing a performative capability, and how can this (partly tacit) knowledge be articulated and specified?

Tacit knowledge

In the dissertation I use three perspectives of tacit knowledge developed by Polanyi, Schön and Wittgenstein. Polanyi (1958/1998 and 1967/2009) describes tacit knowledge or rather tacit knowing as the relationship and integration of two different forms of consciousness, the *subsidiary* and the *focal*, where the *focal* can be articulated and the *subsidiary* is tacit. In other words, when you learn something part of the knowledge making process is implicit (tacit).

Seen in the perspective of Polanyis two terms of knowing, the *proximal* and *distal*, knowledge is ambiguous and mutually connected forming a meaning-relationship. When you learn something you focus on certain parts of a whole, your attention is aimed on the *focal*. Polanyi (2009, p. 18-19) gives the example of the pianist who in order to develop her skills sometimes focuses on a part of the whole, like the finger work, the whole in this case being a piece of music. Later when the pianist focuses again on the piece of music as a whole, that which had been *focal* moves back to being a *subsidiary* of consciousness. This is done through a shift where what had been *distal* becomes *proximal*, from being focally aware of something ones consciousness transfers away from the details and becomes one with the body (the *subsidiary* consciousness).

Schön (1983) proceeds, just like Polanyi, from the perspective of skilled practitioners, who often know much more than they are able to articulate about their profession. According to Schön, this knowledge is partially tacit. Schön distinguishes between reflecting on a practice and reflecting in a practice (reflect on their *knowing-in-practice* as opposed to *reflection-in-action*). The former is about looking back and reflecting on experiences in earlier projects and situations in order to explore and understand your present actions. Schön means that reflection-in-action is about reflecting in the situation. The concepts of *knowing-in-action* and *reflection-in-action* offer us certain possibilities to apprehend and explore part of the ephemeral knowledge found in theatre by allowing the practitioner to verbalize and reflect *in* action upon the knowledge of the situation.

Wittgenstein (1953/1992) stressed that assertions can only have meaning in relation to their own specific contexts, and that the significance of concepts depend on how you use them,

as rules in a *praxis*. Language and concepts are, according to the late Wittgenstein, connected to our actions and practices. We participate in different *language games* depending on the activity or the situation. The practice forms the language and makes it comprehensible within its (own) context. The concept *language game* is therefore important in the understanding of how knowledge is tacitly transformed in the classroom.

Method

In the dissertation I am using *learning study* (Pang & Marton 2003; Marton & Pang 2006) as a research approach. In a learning study a group of teachers and a researcher collaborate and develop a research lesson in a cyclical process of planning. The research lesson is evaluated and revised up to 2-4 times. The teachers and researchers select together an *object of learning*, a defined area in the subject. A pre-test is designed in order to ascertain the level of knowledge of the students in this particular area. The findings from the pre-test are then used as a starting point to design the research lesson with the help of *variation theory* (Lo & Marton, 2012), the research lessons are then applied, tried out and revised.

What is critical for learning (*critical aspects*) something specific is explored through a systematic teaching process (see e.g. Marton & Pang, 2006). The learning study has often been presented as a hybrid of the Japanese *lesson study* (Fernandez, Cannon & Chokshi, 2003; Lewis et al., 2006) and a *design experiment* (Brown 1992; Marton & Pang 2006). Once again, specific knowledge concerning teaching and learning is produced through a process of planning, evaluating and revising the lesson based around an *object of learning*; this also helps the students understanding of the object.

The way in which I use the learning study in the dissertation differs however somewhat from how it is more often used. My questions concern the meaning of knowing a performative capability. I do not focus so much on the results of the research lessons in terms of students learning or on the design of the lessons themselves, rather I use the data from the learning study as a way to describe and analyse the object of learning per se, and use the pre-test from the learning study cycle for phenomenographic analyses. The four different pre-tests were chosen and planned together with the teachers and the pre-tests were recorded on video.

Analyses – Phenomenography

In phenomenography, qualitatively different ways of experiencing a phenomenon are analysed and the results of this analysis form *categories of description* (Marton, 1981, 1994). By comparing the differences between expressions concerning a certain phenomenon, qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomenon can be distinguished. These ways of experiencing are described in metaphorical terms as *qualitatively different categories of descriptions*. The units of analysis are »ways of experiencing« which cover linguistic as well as non-linguistic aspects. Phenomenography emerged from empirical studies of learning in the early 1970's, and was mainly based on interviews. I analyse and categorize filmed material through different expressions in relation to the *object of learning*. With expressions I refer to speech, movement, gaze etc. By analysing differences between ways of experiencing, the categories of descriptions can be constructed, described and related to each other.

Variation theory has emerged from the phenomenographic tradition and describes learning as a process in which to identify new aspects of something (Marton & Booth 1997; Marton

& Pong 2005; Runesson 2006). In order to identify and discern new aspects of an *object of learning*, one must have experienced variations of this object in the past. If everything in the world was blue, then one would have no concept of the meaning of the word »blue«, nor would one understand the concept of »colour«. However, when you discover that there is red and green, then you have experienced a variation and *discerned a difference*. Variation then is the prime factor needed for discernment, which is essential for learning. If at the same time one perceived that the object was smaller or larger, or had a different texture, then one would have simultaneously discerned other aspects as well.

Phenomenography looks for the meaning of something (in this case the meaning of knowing the object of learning) rather than trying to explain what something is. It is the description of how a phenomenon in a variation of different ways, is experienced by people. In the classroom there is a limited number of ways of experiencing a phenomenon, which in turn means that it is possible to separate one way of experiencing from another.

By experiencing variations one can distinguish different aspects of the object (Lo & Marton 2012; Marton & Pang 2006; Pang 2006; Runesson and Marton 2002; Runesson 2006). More complex ways of knowing are characterised by the simultaneous discernment of more and more differentiated aspects of a phenomenon (Marton & Lo 2007; Lo 2012) and it is in this way that one can approach the meaning of knowing the object of learning.

Results

The results consist of four chosen *objects of learning* which help to examine the meaning of knowing:

1. The capability of expressing presence in a specific situation.
2. The capability to collaborate in a mutual performance (written text).
3. The capability for scenic interaction during a dialogue.
4. The capability to affirm each other in a mutual performance (improvisation).

The results are described as categories (different ways of experiencing the *object of learning*) and as aspects. The aspects emerge as differences between the ways of experiencing (the *object of learning*) and through the process of the research lessons.

1. The capability of expressing presence in a specific situation
The analysis generated the following categories:

Expressing presence in a specific situation as…
• *Imitation* – imitating a similar situation that you have experienced before.
• *Interaction* – interacting with one's fellow actors.
• *Illustration* – to communicate ones expression to an audience/observer.
• *Incorporation* – combining a number of the above expressions and allowing them integrate and interplay with each other.

Different aspects of the object of learning emerged as differences between the categories (critical aspects) and these aspects were described as: being able to maintain one's concentration and

the uphold an illusion; being able to react to a situation; being able to physically relate to a co-actor through one's body; being able to communicate a situation previously experienced.

The teachers completed a number of research lessons. The aim of the research lessons was to further deepen the knowledge of what it is you need to know in order to experience the concept of presence. During these lessons further aspects also emerged: being able to communicate actions; being able to be relaxed and focused at the same time; being able to identify different theatre genres.

By investigating the object of learning the different ways of expressing presence in a specific situation are specified. In a teaching situation the object of learning is often taken for granted, however in a learning study cycle it is made visible and articulated.

2. The capability to collaborate in a mutual performance (written text)
The analysis generated the following categories:

Collaborating in a mutual performance as...
- *Follow* – being able to dynamically give focus
- *Lead* – being able to dynamically take focus
- *Fuse* – being able to dynamically give and take focus in a complex way

Analysis of differences between the ways of experiencing resulted in the following aspects to be discerned: being able to stay focused; being able to physically give and take focus alternatively; being able to see one's own (and everyone else's) function as parts of a mutual performance. The teachers then constructed research lessons and another aspect of the capability to collaborate appeared in the material: being able to describe aesthetic taste.

3. The capability for scenic interaction during a dialogue
The analysis generated the following categories:

Scenic interaction during a dialogue as...
- *Staggering steps* – characterized by the focus being on the text and what is being said
- *Creating actions* – what is said between the lines, often expressed through the body and gestures
- *To be in the situation* – an openness towards what is happening in the moment in any given situation

In the analysis of differences between the categories aspects emerged and were described as: being able to memorize, analyse and interpret a text; being able to confront oneself in a room together with someone else. Other aspects of being able to interact also emerged during the research lessons such as: being able to maintain the energy and drive of a story; being in the here and now; being able to be relaxed and attentive at the same time.

4. The capability to affirm each other in a mutual performance (improvisation)
The analysis generated the following categories:

Affirm each other in a mutual performance as…
- *Drive* – focus is on one's own narrative
- *Duplicity* – focus is both on its own and the others narrative
- *Interplay* – focus is on the mutual narrative and the direction that the improvisation is taking

Aspects emerged as differences between the categories such as: being able to establish a situation and a relationship; being able to listen to the other's narrative; being able to develop and perform a joint improvisation.

After conducting the pre-test a first research lesson was devised. Further aspects of the capability to affirm emerged in the subsequent research lessons such as: being able to determine the course of events; being able to give positive impulses; being able to understand the difference between a conflict and a problem; being able to work with temporality.

Through the analyse of the four different objects of learning, the categories, the aspects which emerged as the differences between the categories and the additional aspects that were revealed during the research lessons have all helped to pinpoint the object of learning and through this articulation some aspects of performative capability were identified.

Synthesis and discussion

In the phenomenographical analyses common traits or characteristics of the four different objects of learning emerged. What appears prevalent in the analysis is a physical dimension – a bodily knowledge that I call *Bodybildung* (cf. with the German word *Bildung*, formation).

As a result of the analyses a synthesis appears where the common qualities in this case were: *Bodily liability* – which can be seen as developing a shared narrative. *Bodily creativity* – the development of an action or a story, and finally *Bodily confidence* – the development of a trust in relation to a text, person or an object.

Using such a synthesis and the results generated in process of specifying the objects of learning could be useful for teachers in the process of planning lessons, giving feedback to students, for assessments and grades, for discussing the content of lessons with other teachers, to help explain the *object of learning* in the classroom and ultimately for us begin to recognize different levels of knowing.

When dealing with objects of learning the complexity of an object is defined. Most teachers have preconceived notions of the object of learning based on past experience and know-how. Through working systematically with the object of learning in this way, we develop our understanding of an object and can thereby focus on the difficulties of a certain student or student group. Teachers and students can learn from this situation, develop their knowledge and deeper understanding of the object of learning whereby a mutual relationship between objects, teacher and student comes to light.

Notes

1. The main course in the school subject theatre is in Swedish called scenisk gestaltning, which is translated to stage performance by the National agency for education (Skolverket). (Retrieved 2014-06-13). Available from: http://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/gymnasieutbildning/gymnasieskola/oversattningar

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