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Intercultural teaching

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Abstract

This study is about a one-day work-shop where 12 international students (Europe, South-America and Australia) met 5 Swedish students about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children. This was based on mixed working-groups and the participants were assigned different Articles so that their experiences from their home countries on the Convention became the base from which to develop new knowledge. Their different experiences were supposed to focus on similarities and differences, to be discussed, problematised and shaped into large wall-painting. The comprehensive socio-cultural theory of learning was used to identify communications through observation and video-recording. The wall-paintings were presented and interpreted by the students. All material was analyzed according to socio-semiotic theory. Cultural tools contribute to the development of knowledge, adding new understanding to practical attainments. We chose visual and informal talk as our working form: this way of planning the lessons is supported because the visual material remains over time, everyone has access to it and discussion is easy for all. The students learn to reflect on their own cultural background to compare this, and showed the different ways they looked on children and their living conditions, and their different interpretations of the Convention.

Key words: *CRC, Hands-on, Socio-cultural learning, Mixed group*

Introduction

In this text we describe intercultural teaching carried out with foreign and Swedish students from Malmö University in a one day workshop about the Convention of Children's Rights.

The workshop aimed to engage students from different countries and cultures in a dialogical process, in order to develop encounters in the University on a more global level. It is important not only that the students have the possibility to discuss but also to reflect critically concerning Children's Rights. In this project we were interested to notice both advantages and difficulties when students meet 'over the border'. According to Bohlin (2009) it is important to look not only at the difference between ethnicity but also other differences; for example, in relation to social background, gender and age. The University of Malmö has a widened recruitment which means that students who come from homes unaccustomed to higher education compose a large number of the students. All members of the University community have multicultural encounters on a daily basis. This paper focuses on a project in which we had invited Swedish students to meet students from an international group studying 'The Convention of Children's Rights'. We used English language during one day's lessons.

Bohlin (2009) points out many questions that can be involved when you work in an intercultural way. The most difficult question, according to him, is in what way we work with the multicultural in a didactically manner. Is it necessary that we treat everyone in a similar way or is it more important to compare different cultures? He suggests that we can think about multicultural in terms of social background. Further he means that if multicultural really may characterize education and research we have to discuss these questions. Often multicultural means that people with different cultural background live in the same country. It may imply that different ethnic groups live side by side within the same nation and cooperate in their daily life. But Bohlin develops the discussion and interprets the concept as a competence that makes it possible to navigate without problems over the borders of tradition and culture. Another aspect is that integration is a way of tolerance showed to people who are different from you. The minister of integration in Sweden, Nyamko Sabuni, wrote in a paper that the Human Rights do not show consideration for culture, religion or tradition. A further way to interpret the concept is if you focus on dialogue as a pattern. You have to make use of the possibilities from culture meetings, to learn from the foreign. Then you become more aware about your own tradition and, hopefully, be more critical.

Other researchers (Lorentz & Bergstedt, 2006) talk in a similar way. From their point of view they suggest some steps of intercultural competence. First you reach acceptance, then a form of reflection which means that you think about your own earlier convictions and behavior. Later they see education and good manners as ways to integration.

Both Vygotskij and Bakhtin stress the importance of social factors and the language connected to learning. They meant that to talk is to learn to think (Dysthe & Iglund, 2001). Vygotskij believed that nobody can learn without development and nobody can develop without learning. These are two concepts that are interdependent and that we learn from each other in what he termed the zone of proximal development. Vygotskij emphasized that the adult's knowledge is translated to the child through language and then internalized by the child. Wretsch notes two different shapes of internalization: mastery and appropriation (Dysthe, 1995). Mastery means that you take over something. Appropriation means that you make something to your own, you control it. Mastery and appropriation are two steps in a developing process. It is important to realize that there is no automatic way when you go from mastery to appropriation. It is a process that demand engagement and time (Dysthe, Olga, 2001).

What is the aim for our study? In Malmö University we work on the first level as we try to train students to have greater acceptance of 'the other' and also to show the students that different cultures may live side by side. The importance of working in a multilingual way in the teacher education may allow us to discuss, not only in what way we handle with different verbal languages, but also in what way we use different ways of non verbal expressions in a widened perspective. During many years we have tried to allow the students to work with forming their thoughts in different visual ways. This year we discussed to change our own participation and decided to collect data through making a video from this special day. The advantage with this method is that we save the process in a visual document. We have the possibility to restudy the process during the day and point out the most important observations.

Today the language in common among young people is 'crossing the borders' (Tornberg & Carlsson, 2009). People in common use language, verbal and not verbal, in a multimodal way and choose the most suitable form for the moment. The question for them is: How can I express one thing in the most suitable way. Within the semiotic field this question has been discussed for a long time. We move from the idea that the different modes in multimodal texts are strictly bounded (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001 p 2).

Aesthetical processes of learning

The concept *aesthetical processes of learning* means different things in different traditions (Lindstrand & Selander, 2009). As we work with becoming teachers we have to think about different methods to reach young people with serious content. In this project we use video to document the lessons and we suggest visual methods during the process. Lindstrand and Selander means Human being is form-shaping, a creator of symbols and also an interpreter. Feelings and thoughts are difficult to express but you can take help from aesthetical methods. A created form is not only a representation but also an expression that reveals in what way you have understood something. An aesthetical expression is not a reproduction because you add something new exactly like when you talk about other processes of learning. You invent something new and that can change the whole thing. This process also presumes imagination.

At school it is important to think about how pupils develop their identity. We have to force them to get outside themselves and then return. You also have to encourage the pupil to handle the strange. To admit that learning has a specific character and it promotes the concentration and the capability of thinking of exactly the problem or question and following that thread to the end (Lindstrand & Selander, 2009).

We know that young people want to be taken seriously. School is a place where the young ones shall have the possibility to put questions of decisive importance. Outside school, the media use content about life-style and at school we have to develop complements to language, codes and attitude of the popular-culture. Meaning and aims of life is a personal project. You have to create connection and meaning together at school and school ought to be a democratic laboratory where learning processes develop. Segregation, outsiders and social differences are problems at school. School ought to be a centre of democracy. Respect for differences presupposes sympathizing with and knowledge about in what way different worlds of life or culture become meaningful and give a person an identity. Culture is a production and exchange of meaning. At school the adults ought to develop sensitivity and understanding and also read their own culture and in what way it is compared with the worlds of the pupil. We have to explore the world together with the young people (Lindstrand & Selander, 2009).

The one day workshop

This is a description on a one day workshop with an intercultural perspective. The following are different examples from the workshop concerning the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The groups consisted of five Swedish students and twelve

international students from Europe, South-America and Australia. The working-groups were mixed.

The day begun with two short lectures, one about The Convention and one about the method to work in an aesthetical way to develop understanding for different arguments, thoughts and experiences.

Task one, *The balloon*, is an example of working with CRC and young children. The students were divided into smaller groups. Each group worked with a fictitious task. The participants in each group are sitting in a balloon. Suddenly the balloon starts to leak air. The group has to decide which package they have to throw away if they want the balloon remain in the air. When the group has made their decisions and has thrown away the package, the balloon still leaks and the group has to continue to throw away packages. The task for the participants is that they have to take a jointly decision which package they want to throw away. Which will be number one and in which order are the remaining packages thrown away? Which package did the group decide as the most important so they will be able to feel good? Why do they think as they do? The different groups accounted for their decisions, thoughts and reflections. One important thing is that there is no right or wrong.

The packages contained:

- toys and a clean environment to live in
- the right to go to school
- clothes and a place to live
- music, comics paper, books and films
- the freedom to speak and think
- play and leisure time
- food and water
- freedom of religion
- love and care from parents and friends

The students worked parallel in the afternoon with two other tasks. Three groups worked with a picture each, showing young people's thoughts about their daily life at school and three groups worked with articles from the Convention of Children's Rights.

One of the tasks, *Another school*, involves evaluating images and is concerned with young people's opinions about, and understanding of school. The different pictures are an integrated form of material from an evaluation made by researchers some years ago, initiated by the Swedish Government (Lind & Åsén, 1999). Instead of making a usual questionnaire the informants were requested to produce a picture describing in what way they take part in staying at school. These pictures are examples made by children from seven years old until 18 years old.

The task

- Each group gets a picture from the Swedish evaluation.
- The group discusses the content through interpreting the picture based on a simple semiotic analyzes (denotation, connotation, private associations).

- The group *answers* the picture through producing a new picture. The size of the picture was a big wall-painting. The task was to comment on the content and make a new solution, a new idea, after discussion in the group.
- The two pictures constitute the basis for further discussion connected with the Convention of the Children's Rights.

The other task, *The articles*, was that half of the participants were assigned different articles from CRC. Each group got one article and a paper-box. The students were supposed to read the article, interpret it and discuss the content. Then they had to decide how the whole or part of the article can "move" into the box. This means that the group members had to transfer the text into a box in a shaping way.

- Each group gets an article and a box (room).
- The members of the group discuss how the whole or a part of the article can "move" into the box.
- The group members shape their concept in the room.
- The students account for how the process from written text to visual text developed.

Process and result

What happened in the groups when they were working? During the students were working with the task about the balloon, they discussed actively, laughed a lot and exemplified and argued from their own experiences. The groups meant that food and water, love and care and clean environments were the most important packages. The students challenged each other both in the small group during the process and in the big group during the account. They listened, talked and put questions. The mixed working-groups were heterogeneous concerning the cultural and social dimension and the students appreciated the physique meeting between students from different countries and different experiences. That was a great challenge.

The task for three groups of the students during the afternoon was to answer a picture that was made by a child. To work in a practical way is unusual and made the students a bit surprised but they also were full of expectation. They had to start with analyzing the picture and also to have a dialogue and sketch their ideas on paper. This was a very intensive part of the lesson. Then they started to create their picture in big size on a paper which was hanging on the wall. We noticed that their picture grow during cooperating between the students. The different visual elements were added at the same time as they talked lively about possible solutions. They showed evidently that they had their own opinions but they also listened to each other's arguments and fulfilled the task with both humour and seriousness. When they accounted for their picture and its content the other students were involved with both feelings and share in the matter.

When the students accounted the afternoon task about the articles they focused on the process from text to a visual form. The aim was to let the students' different experiences from their home countries concerning the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children constitute the base to develop new knowledge. The students' different experiences were supposed to focus on similarities and differences. These were supposed to be discussed

and problemized. In the discussions it became obvious that people from different countries look upon children and their living conditions in different ways. Even the way to read and interpret the CRC is varying although the countries had ratified the CRC.

Pedagogical guiding principles

These three tasks above are good examples connected to the Swedish approach to knowledge.

The concept of knowledge in Sweden since 1994.

Three aspects of knowledge:

- Knowledge as a constructive aspect. You construct your own knowledge when you need.
- Knowledge as a context aspect. The knowledge will be intelligible against the silent context.
- Knowledge as a functional aspect / as a tool.
- Four forms of knowledge
- Facts
- Understanding
- Skills
- Experiences

Facts are quantitative, we know more or less.

Understanding is qualitative, we know on different levels not more or less.

Skills are the practical correspondence to the theoretic understanding.

Experiences are the hidden form of knowledge. This form is very important because it is based on the judgements we make.

It is very important that you as a teacher are aware of which focus you have concerning the form of knowledge according to your teaching.

Cultural tools contribute the phenomenon that you develop knowledge through adding new understanding to earlier practical attainments. We chose visual tools as working form together with the informal talk. This way of planning the lessons fortifies knowledge because the visual material remains over time. Everyone has access to the picture and the essence of the discussion is easy to approach for everyone.

Notes from the students

The students made a written evaluation from which we could read following notes:

“I have enjoyed this workshop by working with people from different countries, discussing Children’s Rights in both a serious and playful way”.

“Mixtures between Swedish students and multicultural / exchange students are great”.

“Advantages – of today’s learning process include the ability to converse with students from a variety of different backgrounds”.

“I was reflecting over my own country and learnt more about the countries from others. Learnt in various learning styles (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic)”.

Commentary and conclusion

If we look at our purpose for this one-day-work-shop we can say that the project developed in a successful way. Some noteworthy things we can mention are;

- The groups become more dynamic if you mix students from different countries than if you have students from one nation.
- The pleasurable atmosphere and the opened working climate support the learning.
- The students become aware about their own attitudes.

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