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Didaktik research of classroom interactions - How is transparency in anthropological field studies possible?

Tina Bering Keiding¹ & Søren Kruse²

Research question

How can observation methods, which on one hand draws on participating observation and on the other hand offers transparent and disciplined methods of observation and observation of observations in order to provide further scientific analysis and communication, be developed?

Abstract

The aim of our project is to develop highly needed research method and techniques, which open educational practice to didaktik¹ research in ways that are both practical useful and offer transparent and disciplined observations.

With the empirical turn in education and curriculum studies in the 1960's an important research approach in order to study classroom practice of teaching and the life in educational institution was anthropological field studies (Klette, 2007; Hammersley, 2006).

These classroom observations generally address other aspects of classroom interactions than those fundamental to didaktik research. Shortly, our conditional premise is that didactical relevant classroom observation focuses on communication that provides and observes learning of educational value. In the content dimension this regards learning objectives and subject matter. In the social dimension questions like how do the participants (teachers and students) participate and interact? And the time or process dimension deals with questions on how teaching strives to stimulate and observe learning (technologies). In contrast anthropology mainly has studied issues like bullying, class, gender, power, etc. It is not that these issues aren't relevant to both learning, teaching and education but they do not tell anything about the processes and results of teaching and learning, teaching, which are the key-topics from a didaktik research perspective.

Regarding observation of learning also another trend can be seen: National and international tests comparing students and countries on the base of test results, often designated learning outcomes. Often simultaneously attributing observed differences in learning outcome to differences in quality of teaching. However it is not evident that high scores in tests reflects high quality in teaching and learning (Hopmann 2008). And clearly they do not tell anything about the process of interaction in classroom, which may or may not have influenced the actual test results.

From here didaktik is left with almost no knowledge on how different content, organisation and technologies influence teaching and learning. And more important to this paper: Left

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without adequate methods to observe classroom interactions in order to produce the information needed in order to answer the question: What works or how does it work? All though this paper exclusively deals with methods for observation of classroom interactions, studies of interaction are not only relevant to didaktik research and/or the educational system. Intervening communication, learning processes and judgements on learning/not-learning take place all over in society; in interactions, organisations and functional systems. Thus the ability to observe these processes in order to understand what's going on is relevant to a wide range of research areas.

One way to study teaching and learning is from self-descriptions. Regarding teaching and learning in the educational system learning contracts, learning journals, portfolios ect have played a major role in observation of especially learning within the last decade (Baird & Northfield 1992, Ellmin 2001) Regarding teaching a strong focus has been put on clear objectives, national comparability and detailed description of content. However neither of these help to understand classroom interactions, but must be seen as retrospective reconstructions and programs of reflection, respectively (fx Luhmann 2002; Keiding 2008, Kruse 2008, Rasmussen et al 2007)

In contrast anthropology has a strong tradition for observation and description of social interaction. But is a shift in the well-known issues for anthropological classroom studies with the fundamental issues of didaktik sufficient to provide didaktik with adequate methods for research of classroom teaching and learning?

From a Luhmann-perspective the immediate answer seems to be ‘no’ – further work is required!

Drawing on Luhmann both the concept of observation, but especially his distinction between psychic and social systems and the distinction between their media consciousness and language, seems to collide with the established principles and premises for observation and documentation of social interactions, no matter whether they stems from anthropology (Russel 1998), Psychology (Langdrige 2004) or general social methodology (Crano & Brewer 2002)

Regarding observation most methods stress that observation is based on selectivity and that the observer therefore must be explicit on what he or she wishes to observe. Themes or guiding differences must in other words be selected and made explicit; for instance: +/- learning of educational value. However conditions for indication of the inner, respectively the outer side of the guiding difference are seldom, to say never, an issue. This concerns two questions: When or under which conditions is an utterance referred to the inner side of the form? Which system serves as point of reference for indication? Is it teaching, teacher or researcher?

By not making these conditions explicit the methods avoids transparency in selection of data and empirical construction. However, this could be handled by minor adjustments in the existing methods, whereas the following raises more fundamental questions.

Common to research on social processes is that field notes often play a major role as data for empirical construction and analysis. And field notes seem to raise several challenges which must be handled this technique shall be compatible with systems theory.

In general the process of transforming field notes into empirical information is paid some or event significant attention. In contrast the *reduction of complexity* and *interpretation* (attribution of meaning) which, drawing on Luhmann (for instance 1995:111) is an unavoidable consequence of transforming observations carried out in the medium conscience into the medium of language (field notes) stands completely unobserved and opaque.

How – if at all – can this be handled? Can field notes be used for data production? Or should classroom observation always be monitored in a way which fixes the otherwise evanescent events of communication in order to provide possibilities to turn back and test previous interpretive-observations? And how would this delimit didaktik research of classroom interactions?

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ⁱ The scientific discipline which offers theories about teaching and concepts for observation and reflection of teaching are in Germany and Scandinavia designated didaktik. The English word didactic, which is “*The most obvious translation of didaktik is generally avoided in Anglo-Saxon educational contexts, and refers to practical and methodological problems of mediation and does not aim at being an independent discipline*” (Gundem & Hopmann 1998). Didaktik denotes the scientific discipline constructing theories of teaching, which offer teachers concepts to think and talk about teaching. Hence the English word didactic is not an appropriate translation of the German and Nordic word didaktik. As there is no corresponding word in English, we use the word didaktik in this text.