

11. CONTEXT AS THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY

The Contribution of Context to Teaching & Learning of Culture

INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this volume fully illustrate that “culture is not taught in a vacuum or learned in isolation” (Kirkebæk, Du & Jensen, chapter 1 this volume). The teaching and learning of culture may be influenced by many factors both inside and outside the classroom. Meanwhile, culture influences the context and may be considered either a threat or an opportunity.

Context as Threat

In the Danish education field a strong component of teacher identity can be coined in the phrase, “my classroom is my castle and my subject is my treasure.”¹ Danish teachers have freedom of choice in teaching methods, they select teaching materials themselves, and traditionally, they plan, conduct, and evaluate their own teaching with very little intervention from school and national authorities. This high degree of freedom and autonomy may at least partly explain why some teachers, in the authors’ experience, consider influences from outside the classroom as potential threats and interdisciplinarity as highly overrated. These teachers, here termed “the teaching purists,” tend to keep their classes and subjects as insulated and isolated as possible and in fact de-contextualised. One often heard argument is that because classroom time is already limited, there is not time to focus on anything outside the main subject area. Another argument is that interdisciplinarity may confuse students and disturb their acquisition of the primary subject.

Context as Opportunity

Another, and seemingly, growing number of teachers, we term them “the teaching pragmatists” also use limited class hours as an argument, but as opposed to the teaching purists, they use it as an argument for closer coordination and cooperation between teachers, subjects, and classes. Because lessons are few, it is, on the one hand, essential to avoid overlaps and unnecessary repetition in different classes. Meanwhile it is also necessary to integrate and create meaningful contextualisation

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of subjects by building on each other's lessons in order to secure the fastest possible progress.

The teaching pragmatists do not believe that interdisciplinarity and simultaneous teaching of more than one subject during class will affect students' primary subject acquisition in any negative way. They see drawing clear borderlines between subjects neither as an aim nor as a real possibility. They argue that noting similarities and differences between already known subjects and new ones may help and support acquisition.

The positions of teaching purists and teaching pragmatists correspond to the positions of those who advocate a descriptive or a complex view of culture (see chapter 2 and Jensen (2007) for an elaborate discussion of the two views). A descriptive view of culture sees it as something fixed, stable and very slow-changing; on the other hand, a complex view of culture sees culture as something in a state of constant flux, created and negotiated between individuals within different social contexts. The studies in this volume may be used to argue that neither teaching, learning, nor cultures are fixed entities that can remain or be understood in isolation. Teaching, learning, and culture, as well as the teaching and learning of culture, are all deeply embedded in social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NEXT?

The Need to Explore How Context May Contribute to Teaching and Learning of Culture

In this volume, we have articulated and elucidated five factors that may influence teaching and learning of culture, and we encourage teachers to consider each of them when planning, conducting, and reflecting on their teaching. These factors are their views on (1) globalization and culture, (2) how they conceive of culture, (3) their teaching and learning approaches, (4) how they handle the teacher-student relationship, and (5) creating a supportive learning environment.

The remaining question is what we ought to do next. If, as the conducted studies strongly indicate, influences from inside and outside the classroom cannot – and should not – be eliminated from the teaching and learning of culture, we should not try to avoid or limit these influences, but instead investigate and explore how they may be integrated into and used constructively in the teaching and learning of culture. In this way, teachers, students, subjects, and context may be allowed to enrich each other and enter into a fruitful dialogue, play together, and cooperate to achieve the established goal: Acquisition of cultural awareness and intelligence. However, before this desire can be translated into action, we must readily face the five challenges outlined below.

FIVE REMAINING CHALLENGES

Challenge One: Context as Opportunity, not as Threat

The first challenge is to convince teachers and students that context gives additional opportunities for learning and should not be viewed as a threat to teaching and learning of culture. Context is not an obstacle, but constitutes an important resource that teaching and learning may benefit from. Resources may take different forms, including other courses and subjects, informal learning environments, students' cultural heritage, and more.

Challenge Two: Helping Teachers Cooperate More

The second challenge is encouraging teachers to cooperate more often and effectively. In Danish primary schools, a decision was made that all teachers should work in teams. It was a decision taken by the central government, and in the beginning, many teachers participated in the obligatory team-meetings more because they had to than because they believed they could benefit from them. However, the initial doubts and suspicion about working in teams has gradually been replaced by a more positive attitude, and today most primary school teachers are happy to prepare, conduct and evaluate teaching in teams. A similar development can be observed in Danish high schools and – at a slower pace – at Danish universities.

Challenge Three: Examinations that Fit an Interdisciplinary Approach

The third challenge is to make examinations fit the interdisciplinary approach. When teachers work in teams and coordinate and cooperate closely across subjects and classes, it must be reflected in the examinations. If course integration and interdisciplinarity is the focus in the classroom, it would be a paradox if students continued to be examined in the individual subjects. If the goal of the classroom is to prepare students for real-life work after graduation, then teaching should reflect many disciplines.

Challenge Four: A Need to Create an Informal Learning Environment

The fourth challenge is to create an informal learning environment. At Danish universities, semesters are relatively short and lack of time makes it crucial to create an informal learning environment that supplements the formal teaching and learning in the classroom and supports students' independent and peer-learning processes. Aalborg University, Denmark, is a problem-based learning (PBL) university as described in more detail in chapter 4 and Du (2012). The PBL approach to learning means that all teaching is conducted in the first ten weeks of a semester. Thereafter, students do projects on their own, supported by a supervisor. For the teaching and

learning of languages and other subjects as well, this structure poses a challenge because it results in long teaching gaps between semesters. In order to bridge these gaps and make it possible for students to reach the learning goals, it is important to create and support an informal learning environment outside the classroom. As described in chapter 10, this informal learning environment could take many forms, including seminars, workshops, lectures and different social activities open for all students at the university.

Challenge Five: Make Teachers Feel Ownership of a Study Program, Not Only a Subject

The final challenge is to make teachers feel ownership, not only of their own courses, but of the whole program they are a part of. China Area Studies at Aalborg University can be used to illustrate how this may be done. The program consists of four two-semester courses in Chinese civics, Chinese culture, written Chinese studies, and oral Chinese studies. Until recently, the different courses have been run very independently even though it should have been quite obvious that they would have benefitted from cooperating and coordinating with each other. In order to remedy this situation, the teachers have now set up a team and decided on a number of themes that will be part of all four courses. One of the themes is called human relations. In oral Chinese, students work with greetings, and in written Chinese, they write greetings and introductions and closing letters. In Chinese culture, the cultural meanings of different greetings are analyzed and discussed, and in Chinese civics, human relations in China are put into a broader historical, social, political, and economic context. Therefore, the different courses support and benefit from each other, and the students are able to experience a higher degree of coherence and progression. Another goal of the new course structure is that it nurtures a sense of ownership of the whole program among the teachers.

IN CLOSING

The power of context in teaching and learning culture is strong. The context may be invisible and hide itself as tacit knowledge, taboos, non-formulated beliefs and embedded values, or it may be very visible and present itself as a study guideline, an examination requirement, parents' expectations, and more. No matter what form the context has, the studies in this volume more than indicate that it is essential to be aware of the power of context in teaching and learning culture in order to understand it and to be able to negotiate it.

The studies further indicate that influences of context cannot – and should not – be avoided. An important and remaining task is to investigate and explore ways to have context contribute to the teaching and learning of culture. Even though, as Fred Dervin reminds us in the foreword, we should “always bear in mind that othering is an international ‘sin’ of which we are all guilty” (Dervin, 2012, here cited

from foreword), we should still allow ourselves to have the intention of creating a learning environment that does not distinguish and build up contrasts, but – on the contrary – avoids comparison and takes communalities and similarities between teachers, students, subjects and contexts as a starting point for future teaching and learning of culture.

NOTE

- ¹ This and the following section elaborate on a discussion in Kirkebæk (2013).

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