

Thinking Together

- Comparing the dialogue in Socratic seminars and in progressive community meetings

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The teacher's voice still dominates the classroom: a teacher talks 70-75 % of the time, even in discussions (Dysthe, 1996, Hillocks, 1989, Liljestrand, 2002, Nystrand, 1997). Where individual work or work in small groups is practiced, this pattern changes: half to two thirds of the talk becomes "desk-talk", i.e. students talking to each other during teacher conducted discussions (Lindström, Arnegård & Ulriksson, 2003, Lindblad & Sahlström, 1998, Tholander, 2002). The conversational pattern of the classroom often is restricted to the teacher asking questions with given answers (Goodlad, 1983, Liljestrand, 2002). The lessons follow certain "rules" for interaction, during which the teacher dominates and the students try to discern the required solution (Edwards & Mercer, 1987, Lemke, 1990). Talk moves regarding knowledge or reasoning are relatively prevalent, but talk moves linking participants' ideas are not (Wolf; Crosson & Resnick, 2006).

Two different traditions of using dialogue aim at changing classroom dialogue in favor of a more democratic, polyphonic interlocution, promoting the students critical thinking: the Socratic tradition of seminars (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002, Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991, Pihlgren, 2008) and the progressive tradition of community meetings (Pihlgren, 2004). Utilizing videotaped sessions with two Swedish classrooms of ten to twelve year olds, I will compare the two types of dialogue and their rationales. The sessions were transcribed and the interaction was analyzed closely through a phenomenological approach¹. The analysis focused on finding evidence of the intended critical dialogue, examining the supportive group culture, and the teacher's actions.

The *bildning* tradition and progressive education

Bildning as a description of a cultural and political phenomenon became commonly used in German-speaking countries and in Scandinavia in the later part of the 19th century (Gustavsson, 1991)². There are different ways to interpret *bildning*, creating different ideals. One of these developed during a period of self-education among members of the manual working class and in the Free Church movement in the early Swedish popular education programs around 1880-1930 and included the idea of the Socratic seminar. This ideal can be traced back to Rousseau and the Kantian theory of cognition, where understanding is regarded as a lifelong activity possible for every human being. Popular education is here used as equivalent to the Swedish word "*folkbildning*".

The *Bildning* movement grew contemporary with progressive education. The two movements have some sources of inspiration in common: Plato, Rousseau and Pestalozzi. Important implementers of Swedish popular education referred to the methods of the progressive practice (Olsson, 1921, 1926). Progressive education theory and practice developed in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Europe beginning in the 1880s (Arfwedson, 2000). The main object of the reforms was, as in the popular education movement, to create a better society through education, but also to meet the needs of a different approach to learning (Bernstein & Lundgren, 1983). The core theories of progressive education depended on the specific historical and cultural traditions of the countries where they originated. In the United States, pragmatic philosophy was the theoretical base, with John Dewey as the main philosopher. German educational philosophy, on the other hand,

¹ The video material was originally collected and analyzed for my doctoral dissertation (Pihlgren, 2008). However, only the analyses of the Socratic seminars were eventually used there.

² The word *bildning* is equivalent to *Bildung* in German, *dannelse* in Danish, *obrazhenie* in Russian and to the Greek concept *paideia*. English texts use either "general education", "liberal education" or just "culture".

stemmed from Kant, Pestalozzi, and from the *Bildung* tradition. Shared influences and exchange of ideas however gave the practice a more identical form than the theories. One common method was the community meetings.

The methods of the Socratic seminar

The most widely adopted strategy within popular education was the study circle. In modern days, *bildning* is for all citizens, Oscar Olsson, “father of the Swedish study circle”, stated. Olsson was inspired by Hans Larsson, professor of philosophy in Lund. To Larsson, intellectual activity is an absolute condition if we are to develop consciousness. When educating ourselves, we must try to integrate thought, will and feeling and by intuition reach beyond the conceptions of daily life (Larsson, 1925). Self education, closely connected to libraries, was the most common form of study circle. Some of these circles used the methodology of the Socratic seminar. Various Socratic traditions describe a similar methodology: Leonard Nelson in Germany (1965), Mortimer J. Adler in the USA (1972), and Lars Lindström in Sweden (2000). In the Socratic tradition, intellectual and dialogical habits of mind are expected to be internalized as virtues (cf. Aristotle). The methodology suggests that the seminar is conducted as a series of recurrent activities, starting with individual analysis before the seminar of some “textual” material such as literature, art work, music, or a mathematical problem. The teacher will prepare questions to promote inquiry and foster critical thinking. The seminar should balance between questions of textual interpretation and questions of evaluation of ideas and values to achieve a reflective inquiry. Typical of Socratic interlocution is that no statement is taken for granted as true, false, or foolish without examination. The purpose of seminars is not to give the student an opportunity of free and uncontrolled chatting but to teach the students how to develop and enrich their thinking (Lindström, 2005). If this training of intellectual habits is to take place, the culture will have to foster and promote an open disposition such as the dialogical virtues defined by Lars Lindström (2000): *docility, orderliness, justification, concentration, sincerity, courage, concern, generosity, courtesy, and humility*. The safe seminar ensures a context where “bold” ideas might be tested, as long as they are allowed to be probed (Pihlgren, 2008).

The methods of the progressive community meeting

According to John Dewey (1966) and the progressive educational movement, communication is one of the most essential skills needed to build a democratic society. Dewey’s pragmatic viewpoint is that as the context constantly changes, the moral codes have to be reinterpreted and valued (Hartman, Roth & Rönnerström, 2003), and then put into “intelligent action” to reform society. To think well, students must change the habits of “ordinary affairs and conveniences” and form habits concerned with “precise notions” (Dewey, 1997). These habits include a lively, sincere, and open-minded preference for conclusions that are properly grounded and the ability to handle methods of inquiry and reasoning. Except for the progressive *Laboratory School*, Dewey’s work was almost entirely theoretical (Ryan, 1995).

The French pedagogue Celestin Freinet is a representative of one of the influential teachers working practically with progressive education. Freinet’s practical solution to education in moral and democratic education is group growth through community meetings, focusing on current events in the class (Freinet, 1988). His methods show strong similarities to the early ideas of John Dewey (Pihlgren, 2004), of the Polish-Jewish pedagogue J. Korczak (1988), and the Russian pedagogue A. S. Makarenko (1955). The meeting discusses the group’s mutual concerns. During the week the children have made notes of complaints and suggestions, and this wall newspaper is read and discussed. When there are disagreements, the parties are asked to state their different views. The rest of the class is then asked to help to solve the problem. The same steps are followed if the critique concerns the teacher. The atmosphere should, according to Freinet, be one of constructive criticism, self-examination, and respect.

Comparing the methods

The Socratic seminars as well as the community meetings are carried out as group dialogues about a chosen subject, and promote an open and inquiring culture. Their major goal is to enhance democracy by preparing the students to participate in collaborative dialogues with others. It is hard to tell whether the different promoters of seminars and community meetings actually intended the same when using concepts like *democracy*, or if this was ever the outcome of their practices. However, this is not the chief interest of this review, since I am referring to the intended methodology of the dialogues. The traditions both agree that values and ideas have to be negotiated and tested against life experience and that ethics must be interpreted. However, one of the major differences between Dewey's pragmatic viewpoint and the "Socratic" one seems to be whether or not ideas always have to change with new conditions OR if there is a set of lasting, classical ideas. This difference in viewpoint also cuts through progressive educational tradition. The difference in viewpoint on the constancy of human ideas seems to have educational implications. It results in two methods: The Socratic seminar uses a methodology stressing both interpersonal and intrapersonal learning in dialogue; the community meeting, concentrates on interpersonal methods in dialogue (Pihlgren, 2008). The first tradition uses "textual" material as an active part and focuses on a variety of ideas, moral as well as scientific. The second tradition deals with problem solving or decision-making in the group and focuses on moral ideas. Both traditions appreciate similar behavior or similar dispositions among participants: the intended dialogue is supposed to be an activity where an inclusiveness between the participants is practiced (Burbules, 1993). Some schools and educational organizations use both types of methodology in their classrooms³.

Dialogues in the video filmed sessions

The two sessions used as examples here are filmed in two different classes. One group in grade five practices a Socratic seminar. The children have participated in Socratic seminars for one year. The other group in grade three participates in a community meeting, and the children have participated in community meetings for two years. Both sessions lasts for 45 minutes and the participants are in both sessions seated in a circle. The group in the Socratic seminar discusses a work of art, depicting a tattooed baby with horns, a picture introduced by the teacher. The opening question: "Is the baby good or evil" is introduced by the teacher. A variety of ideas are introduced by the students during the seminar (What importance has upbringing in becoming good or evil? Can one chose to look evil and why would one? Is looking evil the same thing as being evil?). The community meeting is held at the start of the working day and concerns a variety of subjects: a TV-program the night before, their own fears, and three newspaper articles introduced by students, (one about sheep farting and thereby affecting the ozone layer, one about a fat cat, and one about the loss of the ship Estonia). Reading newspaper articles seems to have been introduced by the teacher earlier but is in this session introduced by the students. The other subjects are introduced by students. Both sessions display the intended cooperative dialogue, where the relation between the participants seems inclusive. There are few interruptions that need to be corrected by the teachers in either session, even though the sessions continue for a long time.

Distribution of rhetorical power

In the Socratic seminar, the teacher takes 30 % of the talk turns. The original subject and the material discussed are picked by the teacher, but within the seminar the students are able to pick their own lines of reasoning as long as they keep to the subject:

Sequence 1: From the Socratic seminar

<p>Åsa: How do we know this is a real baby what if it's a mix of a goat then then it could be nasty Pia: ((laughs))</p>

³ Cf. the websites of The National Paideia Center www.paideia.org or Mimer Akademien www.mimer.org.

Oscar: That then how do you know that

Åsa: Sorta evil then it could be born evil we we don't know weh if they are kind or nasty or how hey're born

Lisa: But I think all babies like everything that is born I think is (.) like good from the start

Åsa: Yeh but I don't think th

In the community meeting anyone seems free to pick and elaborate on any subject. The group discusses without the teacher's interruption. The teacher takes about 10 % of the talk turns and seldom interferes. This conversation about the article on the fat cat continues uninterrupted by the teacher for almost three minutes:

Sequence 2: From the community meeting

Teacher: Tell us what it's about

Nisse: Well that one (laughing)

Lisa: That's fun

Bo: Yeah it's fun (laughs)

Barbro: What is it

Leffe: (reading): Fattest in town eighteen kilos eats like three cats

Patrik: Yes check out

Karin: Can I look (2)

Barbro: That's a really fat cat

Nisse: You can send it around

Leffe: It weights eighteen kilos

Patrik: Oh my go:d

Intellectual progress

The teacher in the Socratic seminar seems to actively promote the intellectual progress within the seminar by interrupting to ask for clarifications, asking the student to repeat important ideas, or by asking them to analyze the question:

Sequence 3: From the Socratic seminar

Facilitator: 'Cause can you elaborate on that again more Anders what you just said

Pia: ((laughs))

Anders: Bu I don't wa

Facilitator: Yesbut so that everyone can understand wha y (.) I I understand what you meant

Susanne: Yes

Anders: Yesbut

Facilitator: Yes

The intellectual process is developing during the seminar, and the ideas are being thoroughly pursued, often by the participants themselves. They work together by questioning, contradicting, and finding counterarguments:

Sequence 4: From the Socratic seminar

Cordelia: it can be that you hang out with t the wrong friends (.) crowd an' sorta (.) wrong wrong friends

Conny: Yeh

Sebastian: Company

Susanne: But they're people

Åsa: That's also upbringing

Susanne: That's also upbringing

Lisa: But then it's parents

Cordelia: Yesbut it's like not the upbringing with the parents like

Susanne: No but w' haven't said that it's just the upbringing with the parents

In the community meeting, the teacher doesn't seem to interfere to ask for clarifications or to develop the ideas presented. She asks the students to define what is meant by being "broken

down” once when they discuss the TV-program. However, she seems to accept any answers:

Sequence 5: From the community meeting

Lisa: Yes well yes well you go like mad yeah
Teacher: do you get like crazy or mad or what do you mean
Nisse: Eh say
Lisa: Yes you get broken dwn
Teacher: Wait what you say broken down
Lisa: broken and is turned out an' then likes
Teacher: Yeah what Emma do ya know how does one get broken down (1) no what about you Karin
Karin: Sorta you get fired like
Teacher: You get fired /--/
Lisa: You're chocked
Teacher: You're chocked aha you're chocked
Barbro: You're broken
Teacher: Do you get hurt or what
Lisa: Yes you might be
Patrik: Chocked and hurt
Teacher: Chocked and hurt (nods) (1) okay

The students in the community meeting seem to listen attentively to what others say, and sometimes use statements made by others to enrich their own answers but they never refer to others, or contradict or question someone else's answer:

Sequence 6: From the community meeting

Jacky: I'm afraid of the drunks
Teacher: Of those who're drunk and have been drinking alcohol is that what you mean /--/ what do you say Martin
Martin: To die /--/
Teacher: What about you Diana, what are you afraid of
Diana: I'm afraid of die ing an' then I'm afraid of alco co holjics

In both sessions a very personal statement is made by a student. In the Socratic seminar the teacher chooses to treat the statement as an intellectual problem. This strategy is also used by the teacher in the group's later seminars (Pihlgren, 2008):

Sequence 7: From the Socratic seminar

Lena: I think you do m like you can hate your parents and love a friend
Lisa: Yeh exactly (.) but it's not the same way like /Oscar looks quickly at facilitator/
Oscar: I hate my dad ((silent at the end)) /He bends down/
Cordelia: NOH (.) like (.) I (.) don't hate my parents
Facilitator: Is it isit like isit the same then as if you would hate a friend Oscar (1)
Oscar: What d'ya mean the same
Facilitator: Yeahbut I think about love can be different are the hates different too
Lena: Ye:s
Facilitator: If you say like this I hate you to someone (.) isit the same kind of hate likeif I you say yesbut I hate my dad orif you think that
Oscar: N oh NOT really 'cause
Facilitator: Noh
Oscar: well (.) a parent has like (.) like sorta responsibility like this

When the same type of incident occur at the community meeting, the teacher listens but chooses to change the subject with no further investigation after trying to comfort the student:

Sequence 8: From the community meeting

Emma: An' then (1) I'm afraid that my mom will become a drunk
Teacher: What you say
Emma (affected voice): Mum will be a DRUNK she drinks every day

Teacher: I know I do know she's trying to get better now

Emma: No does she she doesn't go there (3) she doesn't give a damn

Teacher: Oh but maybe it'll be alright anyway (.) maybe anyw yes Martin

Conclusions and discussion

The Socratic seminar and the progressive community meeting have similar goals: to teach the students to cooperate and to reach a more egalitarian dialogue in the classroom. In the two analyzed sessions this seemed to happen. The students were cooperating as a supportive group. Both sessions showed more student participation than shown in research on other classroom activities. When compared to the community meeting, the Socratic seminar was more dominated by the teacher compared to the community meeting, in the number of talk turns and the choice of subjects to discuss. The teacher and the students of the Socratic seminar seemed to promote a critical analysis of the ideas presented throughout the seminar by examining each other's ideas. In the community meeting, the teacher as well as the students accepted each others' ideas in a more relativistic fashion, listening to and maybe adopting some, but without questioning them. The difference in strategy became apparent when a student in each group presented a very personal statement. In the community meeting the teacher responded sympathetically but then left the subject. In the Socratic seminar the teacher treated the statement as an intellectual problem to analyze.

The differences in these two examples might be explained by referring to the original viewpoints of the traditions. The community meeting is part of a progressive tradition, where group cooperation is stressed, the interpersonal learning. The teacher in the community meeting chooses not to interfere as long as the group cooperates. The group will have to come to some consensus when having to make decisions; when not, the individuals can practice on forming and expressing their own opinions. The Socratic tradition stresses the individual, intrapersonal learning in dialogue, as well as the cooperative, interpersonal. The group dialogue is thought to form the individual's habits of mind, to teach a method to think critically on one's own; a mutual answer will not be productive, but neither would relativism. The teacher in the Socratic seminar should encourage the students to find the different facets of the problem, using the "textual" material to facilitate taking a distance to their pre-judgment. The two related methods try to achieve the same educational goals; in practice they show partly different effects, probably depending on their differences in a philosophical viewpoint. One is more successful in promoting the egalitarian dialogue, the other at teaching a disposition to critical analysis. Perhaps both methods have to be used in the classroom to reach the intended goals fully. However, whether or not the differences found in this short comparison are recurrent necessitate further investigation.

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