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Reflections on the meaning of social relations between teachers and students

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Abstract: What happens when the student knows more about the subject than the teacher? Following discussion occurred at a secondary college during a computer lesson.

- *Can't we make our own sounds that we can also use in the games? Making your own sounds is super cool!*
- *We know this already!*
- *Can't we do something else?*
- *No, today we are going to finish the tasks. Get on with it, answers the teacher.*
- *Michael, stop doing what you doing and start working with your tasks, or else you'll have to leave!*

In the paper this situation in the classroom will serve as a point of departure for the discussion. The aim of the paper is to illuminate, enable understanding and discuss the meaning of social relations in the learning process. We limit the discussion to present some ideas of how the students' inherent strength can affect the learning situation, which in turn can have impact on the psychosocial well-being among the students and the teachers. This will be viewed taking Alfred Schutz's notions as a theoretical starting point, and Schutz's theoretical perspective will be discussed in relation to the student's and the teacher's view.

Reflections on the meaning of social relations between teachers and students

Eva Alerby & Krister Hertting

A quite ordinary day in a quite ordinary classroom

A group of 16-year-old students in the 9th grade are having a computer lesson in the school's computer hall. The newly qualified teacher is standing at the very front of the hall. Her degree certificate says, "Mathematics and Physical Education for Lower Forms", but there is no post of this kind in the municipality. Therefore she is standing there now, slightly nervous, in front of a bunch of somewhat school-weary, lanky, pimply and giggly students. At home she has planned this lesson in detail. The exercises of the day are to consist of image processing and an introduction to PowerPoint. So it is just a matter of getting started. She takes a deep breath and then raises her voice to bring some order to the class. The play can begin. It all starts well, in spite of some grumbles and grunts being heard from some of the students. They have obviously done this before, but some revision will never hurt, thinks the teacher in an attempt to keep her spirits up. After five minutes of the lesson, the first comments and questions start being voiced.

- *I want to learn how to edit films in order to put them in a game.*
- *Can't we make our own sounds that we can also use in the games? Making your own sounds is super cool!*

What should she say to this? This was not part of her planning. It will have to wait until some other time. The students go on asking questions and some of the boys in the class start taking over. They walk about in the classroom and show their mates different ways of using the programme. They even start recording sound sequences. More and more students want to learn how to do it. But this was not part of the planning of the day's lesson. The class is getting a bit too unruly and some students are doing completely different things than what she had planned, on the computers, it is true, but still. Using sounds was not to be dealt with until after the image processing. The teacher begins feeling slightly sweaty when realising that her computer knowledge is not in the slightest equivalent to the knowledge that some of the students demonstrate. In an attempt to gain control of the situation again, she orders the students to sit down and listen. This takes time, but at last they are all seated, and she can hand out some exercises. The critical voices are now starting to be heard.

- *We know this already!*
- *Can't we do something else?*
- *No, we shall complete the tasks today. Get going!*

Some of the boys sitting at the very back of the classroom seem to be doing something quite different. What are they doing? Are they playing games? The teacher tells them to do their tasks but to little avail, according to the teacher. Now she must resort to something radical.

- *Michael, stop doing what you doing and start working with your tasks, or else you'll have to leave!*
- *But lay off, I am already doing the tasks! Tell the others, for fuck's sake!*
- *Stop swearing!*
- *But hell, stop nagging! I haven't done anything!*
- *Leave the room, Michael!*

- Why?
- Because I'm telling you!
- But what the hell...
- Out!

Michael stands up and walks out through the door of the classroom. In the corridor he stops and thinks, "But why should I have to be turned out? I didn't do anything. Bloody bitch!" He feels wronged and unfairly treated. Anger and a feeling of powerlessness well up in him. Michael is one of the best in the class as regards computers – anything from programming to using software. He also has a lot of technical know-how. But he has difficulty expressing himself verbally. Michael turns on his heel and walks into the classroom again. He walks straight up to the teacher, who is helping a student at his computer. Michael bends forward, quickly writes a web address and presses Enter. Within fractions of a second a porn site opens. Michael turns round and walks out of the room again without saying a word.

Epilogue

Michael is suspended from all computer teaching for a month. In concrete terms this means that he finishes school earlier every Tuesday. In addition he is barred from his own schoolwork, which is stored on the school's server, but he has still got access to the Internet. He can thus access "everything" via the net – except the files belonging to his schoolwork.

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Within the framework of this paper we intend to discuss and analyse the above story from both a teacher's and a student's perspective. The aim of the paper is to illuminate, enable understanding of, and discuss the meaning of social relations in the learning process. The point of departure of the analysis and discussions will be Alfred Schutz's theory of the phenomenology of the social world. But first of all – what does the theory of the phenomenology of the social world imply? And how can it be linked to the above story?

The phenomenology of the social world – the everyday life-world

The life-world is originally a philosophical concept with both an ontological and an epistemological meaning. In the life-world theory a distinct view of reality and knowledge has therefore been formulated. It is the life-world, our daily world of experience, which we take for granted and live our lives in, that constitutes the basis of our lives. In other words, it is the life-world that constitutes the being of humans in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). The social relations that are constituted, for example among teachers and students, are marked by earlier experiences and hence influence people's actions and treatment of others.

In addition to their own experiences, people's store of experiences naturally consists also of experiences taken over from parents, teachers and others (Schutz, 1980; Schutz & Luckmann, 1974). Schutz interprets the phenomenological life-world concept as the *everyday life-world*, and he divides the life-world into the world of directly experienced social reality, the world of contemporaries, the world of predecessors, and the world of successors. In this way he attempts to structure social life.

I have a direct relation to the people existing in my world of directly experienced social reality. Anyone existing in my world of directly experienced social reality lives in physical co-existence with me, both spatially and temporally, according to Schutz (1980). The world of directly experienced social reality can be divided into a thou-orientation and a we-relation. In the thou-orientation I am one-sidedly conscious of another person's lived existence, but I do not take active part in her/his life. If I have a we-relation to somebody, we are mutually conscious of each other and take part in each other's life.

In the world of contemporaries there are people with whom I only have indirect relations, but we have a they-relationship. In order to understand the world of contemporaries, I create ideal types. The ideal type consists of a certain group of people whom I equip with certain qualities or certain actions that I associate with a certain type of people. The problem is that the ideal type is not alive but created by myself and hence leads a fictitious life. When the ideal type enters my world of directly experienced social reality, it is by no means certain, according to Schutz (1980), that it has the qualities I have attributed to it, but it is given a chance to be concretised and modified.

The world of predecessors is a historical world that can never be transformed into a world of directly experienced social reality. It is available through the experiences I have made myself, but also through the experiences that others have made in my surroundings, for example parents or teachers. Nor can the world of successors be drawn into the world of directly experienced social reality. According to Schutz (1980), it is unhistorical and absolutely free. Schutz summarises the different worlds and their relations to one another in the following way:

If the world of predecessors as being past and finished is characterised by always being unfree and determined, the world of directly experienced social reality by freedom and the world of contemporaries by its essential nature of probability, the world of successors is absolutely indeterminate and indeterminable (Schutz, 1999, p. 214).

Only a small part of the knowledge that I bear within myself thus consists of my own direct experiences. Most of it has a social origin conveyed by my surroundings, where the language and social artefacts are important for the incorporation of knowledge. It is a matter of the social origin of knowledge and of the socially acknowledged knowledge (Schutz 1964, 1980).

Our knowledge has different depths in different areas of our existence, with different degrees of clarity, precision and familiarity. Schutz (1964) calls this the social distribution of knowledge. An important type of knowledge is to know who can help with what, for example a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher. In this way we construct types of the other's field of knowledge. When we have defined an ideal type, we also assume a role ourselves and typify our own behaviour so that it will fit into the context. According to Schutz it is also important to maintain the spirit of community in the field of knowledge in question.

Schutz (1980) further thinks that human beings move among a number of different worlds. The everyday life-world is, however, the superior or supreme reality, and the other worlds are merely modifications of it. In the everyday life-world people lead their everyday lives in the natural attitude, but they sometimes allow themselves to jump over to, for example, the world of play, theatre or school – different provinces of practice. The transition both to and from the everyday life-world takes place at one single bound, according to Schutz (*ibid.*). He sees the natural attitude as the wide-awake state we are in when acting in the everyday life-world. In the natural attitude a human being takes the world for granted as it appears. The everyday life-world is practical and intersubjective; we surround ourselves with things, traditions, languages and other cultural symbols created by human activities and filled with a meaningful content, which makes the world pre-interpreted for us. Everything we experience and perceive is done from a position or a horizon. We perceive what is relevant or pragmatically important to us in different situations. The world is thus given for our interpretations and experiences and functions as a schedule with "pre-knowledge".

In accordance with Schutz's theory of the phenomenology of the social world, there are some concepts, mentioned above, that we wish to further emphasise and elucidate in this context, namely *bodily*, *spatial* and *temporal*. The people to whom I have a direct relation and who exist in my world of directly experienced social reality have a physical co-existence with me, both spatially and temporally, according to Schutz (1980). What does that mean?

Bodily, spatial and temporal – What does that mean in a life-world perspective?

As regards the significance of the body in learning, we want, on the basis of our understanding, to emphasise that learning is shaped by the experiences we make as human beings in the world. These experiences are incorporated¹ above all via our bodies. We look at the world with the aid of our eyes, we listen by means of our ears, we incorporate different taste sensations via our mouths, we take hold of, caress and feel things or other people with our hands, etc. It is thus via our bodies that we gain experiences in the world, and these experiences are in turn prerequisites for learning (Alerby, 2007; Hertting, 2007). It is via their bodies that both the teacher and the students exist in the classroom where the computer studies, described in the introductory story, are to take place. These bodies thus also exist in a special room – the computer hall.

As for the concept of 'spatial', we have chosen to delimit the spatiality to the premises and activities of schools, and we can see that the spatiality of schools functions as a material and concrete framework. This implies that the forms of work in schools are to some extent restricted by this framework, or this spatiality. What opportunities are there, for example, for groups of teachers or students to meet purely spatially and form different constellations? Depending on the spatiality of a school, we are allowed to be in various rooms and move the way we do, which we would not do in the same way, if the concrete building were not there with its walls, doors, windows, stairs, furniture, etc. Our human behaviours can hence be linked to the spatial configuration (Alerby & Hörnqvist, 2003).

The teacher and the students in the above story are in the computer hall not only physically and spatially, they are also there during a specific time of the day. As regards temporality, there is a clear dividing-line between whether time can be regarded as objective or subjective. According to Newton time exists independently of human beings and of the events happening in time. This point of view clearly shows that he regarded time as objective. The question is, however, whether regarding time as objective is relevant in schools? Or whether the point of departure should instead be people's experiences of time – subjective time? Do the teacher and the students in the above story experience time in the same way? Michael was suspended from all computer teaching and cut off from his schoolwork, which was on the school's server for one month. In concrete terms this meant that he did not have to be physically present in the room when the computer teaching took place, but finished earlier one day per week. The question is then whether he experienced this as a punishment or a reward?

Aristotle raises the question of whether time can exist without the human soul (Russell, 1996). In connection with such a question other questions arise, such as for example – how do we look upon the people in schools, as souls – as subjects – or merely as physical bodies – as objects? Hopefully people in schools are looked upon as a whole consisting of a fusion of what is physical and what is mental without a dichotomy between body and soul. But the fact that time in schools must be looked upon in a strict chronological perspective, a linear view of time, entails that the students risk being transformed into objects of the demands of time. Hence the risk also arises that the students are looked upon as physical bodies without souls. In contrast to the objective view of time there is for example Kant, who regards time as subjective (Le Poidevin & MacBeath, 1993; Russell, 1996). Merleau-Ponty (1996) emphasises that time exists only through human beings' existence in the world, so like Kant he too regards time as subjective. Schutz (1962) thinks it is in the transcendence of objective time that my subjective experiences gain a place in my stock of knowledge. It is thus in the encounter between objective time and my inner subjective perception of time that my biographical narrative is created.

¹ *Incorporate* is derived from the Latin word *corpus*, which means 'body' (Nationalencyklopedin, 1998). Cf. also Alexandersson (2001).

According to Giddens (1990), there is a clear connection between time and place, which in the framework of this paper should perhaps rather be called space. In order to state time, we have to relate to other social and spatial markers. According to Giddens, one example of modern societies' dynamic position between time and place is the railway timetable, which was a necessary way of organising railway traffic. This organisation of railway traffic, given shape through the railway timetable, thus enabled railway traffic as a whole as well as people's travel by train. In this connection it may be underlined that the school timetable has the same function as the railway timetable. The intentions of both the railway timetable and the school schedule thus serve the same purpose. The school schedule makes both teachers and students be in the "right" place at the "right" time, thereby making a complex coordination of a school's and its participants' different activities possible.

It is now time to analyse the story in the introduction with the aid of Schutz's theory of the phenomenology of the social world.

Schutz in the world of schools

In terms of Schutz's concept, many of the teachers working in schools probably have a they-relation to the students. Ideal types are created through this they-relation. To the teacher in the introductory story, the ideal type of "student" is probably engaged, orderly, industrious, obedient, interested, socially competent and having a strong inner driving force for learning. There is a risk that the ideal type is based on a conception of how an adult is supposed to manage working life, with very little consideration shown for a student's special conditions in her/his own life-world. In the world of directly experienced social reality, the relation between teacher and student may take different shapes. It may be a we-relation, where the teacher has access to the student's whole life-world. It may also be a thou-orientation, where the teacher only has access to the student's school world. Between these there are degrees of relations between teachers and students. There is a risk that a teacher with a thou-orientation to the student makes decisions based on the ideal type, which is not the best for the student. In order really to be able to understand the student's life-world, do what is best for the student, and be less influencable in relation to the school's ideal type, the teacher has to create a we-relation to the student. With the systems and ideals now existing in schools and education, there is an obvious risk that students will be objectified. It might be said that schools as an institution are trying to prevent and control the indeterminable world of successors.

The teacher in the above story is in a *world of directly experienced social reality* – in this case the school – and she might have a direct relation to the people around her – the students. She exists spatially in bodily co-existence with the students – they are in the same classroom – and temporally – they are together in this classroom for a particular period of time in the day. If as a teacher she is in a world of directly experienced social reality together with a group of students, her relation to the students may be based either on a thou-orientation or on a we-relation. If the teacher assumes a thou-orientation, she is one-sidedly conscious of the students' lived existence, but she does not take active part in these other people's lives. If there is instead a we-relation, the teacher, and in this case the students, are mutually conscious of each other and take part in each other's lives. The question is then how this theoretical reasoning is related to the life in the classroom, as it is described above? It is fairly easy to claim that the teacher has, or in any case should have, a direct relation to the students and vice versa; the question is instead if it is a thou-orientation or a we-relation that is prevalent. The teacher in the introductory story does not seem to have consciousness of the students' lived existence, nor does she take active part in their lives. The same may be said of the students – they are not especially conscious of the teacher's lived existence, and they do not take active part in her life.

If teachers and students do not meet in a world of directly experienced social reality, we will perhaps have to look for this "meeting" in the world of contemporaries. In the world of con-

temporary ideal types are created, which in turn are based on previous experiences, traditions and cultural artefacts. One interpretation of the introductory story is that the teacher is creating ideal types of the teacher and the student, that is, of what knowledge of and relations to one another a teacher and a student should have. The teacher then adapts her actions to these ideal types. The students do not have the same image of how to constitute the relation to the teacher, as they have created other ideal types. The teacher thus creates images of the classroom as a field of knowledge and does not revise these images when the teacher and the students meet in a relation of directly experienced social reality, and the same is true of the students. The social distribution of knowledge is clearly shown and the meeting does not become a mutual we-relation. Instead of creating we-relations and utilising the students' inherent strength, the meeting gets stuck in the grip of the social conventions.

According to Schutz (1964, 1980), we construct types of other people's fields of knowledge, and an important kind of knowledge is to know what different persons can help with – for example a teacher of computer studies. In this context we wish to broaden the discussion to include the student as well. What could Michael in the introductory story “have helped with” during the computer lesson? How could the teacher have acted in order to make use of Michael's computer knowledge instead of sticking to her planning?

Yet another interpretation based on Schutz is that the teacher is anxious to maintain the spirit of community in the classroom, as this is part of her teacher's assignment. It would be a failure if the spirit of community were split up. The fear of the spirit of community splitting up is greater than the willingness to encounter each student.

What we wish especially to emphasise in this connection is the psychosocial well-being of both the teacher and the students in the situation described above. What shape does the social relation between the teacher and the students take? Is there a good psychosocial climate?

Some final words

In today's changeable society, schools are an important arena for students' future lives and health, where values play an important role, in the educational system regarded as a fostering institution. The values can also affect the psychosocial well-being in the school activities (Campbell, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). According to Schutz (1980), the values are based on previous encounters with the world of directly experienced social reality and the ideal types that are created. In schools there are cultural and social encounters of a kind that is fairly rare in the rest of society. A school is a place where students have an opportunity to meet other people that neither the students nor their parents have chosen for them to be with, which gives them a chance to meet and possibly revise these ideal types. According to Johansson and Johansson (2000), values are linked precisely to meetings between people, and they justify actions and provide directions for how to relate to others. What values of how we meet other people, both those who resemble us and those who deviate, are conveyed in the introductory story? And how does this affect the students' and the teacher's psychosocial well-being? Neither the teacher nor Michael probably experienced the situation as particularly good, but we can only speculate about whether, and in that case how, this affected their psychosocial health. What we can state, however, is that the social relation between the teacher and Michael was not the very best. The teacher is likely to have felt “threatened” in one way or another by Michael's computer skills, which were widely superior to the teacher's. But instead of making use of Michael's knowledge of the subject, the teacher chose to follow her planning. As described above, this led to both practical and concrete consequences for Michael, but also for the teacher, who “got rid of” Michael in the classroom for a month. During this period there was one person less who had greater and more advanced computer knowledge than the teacher herself, and she was able to go on following her planning.

Dewey (1991) emphasise that students do not separate the teacher's personality from the subject, they do not even distinguish between the two. Instead the teacher and the subject are intimately intertwined within the child's experience of a subject. As a consequence of this the teacher as a person become very important for the student's experience of the subject, and, from a broader perspective, even for their experience of school in its entirety (Alerby, 2003).

Meetings and the creation of identity is mostly positive for the development of a good psychosocial well-being. But the constant adjustment to new trends, tastes and lifestyles when it comes to for example new technology is many times strenuous. This becomes very evident in school. For some persons these strenuous meetings make a great impact in the identity. The initial story is an expression of this, even if we only, once again, can speculate about the consequences for the psychosocial well-being and the identity of both the teacher and the student.

We have raised the question of whether the teacher and the students in the introductory story are together in a world of directly experienced social reality and hence also in physical co-existence spatially and temporally. It should be indisputable that both the teacher and the students, with their bodies, are in the same room at the same time. What can be discussed, on the other hand, is how the respective party experiences the whole thing. According to Heidegger (1962), people are "thrown into the world", and within the framework of this paper there is reason to paraphrase this statement by stressing that students, as well as teachers, are "thrown into schools" (Alerby, 2004). As a consequence of this fact, it is difficult for students and teachers to escape the prevalent view of time in schools. This in turn leads to a need to reflect on what view of time is prevalent in schools.

The teaching profession in schools may be manifested in several different ways. There are probably a large number of images of how the teaching profession should be manifested. Decision-makers at different levels are also involved in the activities of schools. These decision-makers' world of directly experienced social reality is often somewhere else than with the students. Their thou-orientation and we-relation are often with those who support and administrate the same system. In this way they can confirm to one another how essential and excellent the system is. Schools as an institution thereby risk focusing only on external attributes, which results in the students being regarded merely as an object. As regards the teaching profession, we would like here to associate this to what van Manen (1991, 1995) calls *pedagogical tact*.

Pedagogical tact is not only a method or a practice. It is rather a matter of an attitude or a way of living in and with the practice in which the teacher is involved. It is a matter of acting in a reflecting way, of being a skilled practitioner, with good intuition and a basic humanistic outlook. Pedagogical tact is an embodied being, at the same time as it is part of the social and physical world in which the teacher lives. van Manen (1995) thinks that a teacher with good pedagogical tact is characterised by: (1) a feeling for being able to interpret students' inner thoughts, feelings and understanding, being able quickly to see through motives and in this way being able to influence the relation; (2) having the ability to interpret psychological and social features of the students' inner lives and hence being able to understand the more profound significance of shyness, frustration, interest, difficulties, humour and the like in concretely lived situations with special students; (3) in concretely lived situations knowing for example how much the students' knowledge can be challenged without expecting too much; (4) a moral intuition, by which the teacher has the ability to feel what is the right action on the basis of the pedagogical understanding of the student's nature and preconditions. We will not pass judgement here on whether the teacher in the introductory story possesses pedagogical tact or not. Our interpretation of the situation is, however, that she is far from having acquired the sure instinct that pedagogical tact involves. Pedagogical tact closely resembles an ideal condition for good leadership in the classroom, but not least from the students' perspective it is well worth striving for.

Pedagogical tact is an embodiment of the practice in which the teacher exists, with the norms, values and perhaps also accompanying recognised truths, but it is an embodiment of a

practice where the student is placed in the centre. Intuition seems however to be an important element, but what role does reflection play in this? According to van Manen, opportunities for encounters and reflection are needed in order to develop good pedagogical tact. Intuition is thereby embodied through a process of reflection. van Manen (1995) describes the pedagogue's practical knowledge in the teaching in the following way:

My practical knowledge 'is' my felt sense of the classroom, my feeling who I am as a teacher, my felt understanding of my students, my felt grasp of the things that I teach, the mood that belongs to my world at school, the hallways, the staffroom, and of course this classroom (p. 46).

How can schools work with their teachers in order for them to feel that their space for the pedagogical work is as light and airy as possible and for the students to feel special and seen? How does the teacher develop good pedagogical tact?

When new technology, for example ICT, is introduced in schools' activities, both the teacher's and the students' fields of knowledge are affected. This makes it particularly important to reflect on and be open to revising one's ideal types. This is also a matter of willingness to meet the student in a we-relation. The student must also possess this willingness – the student must want to meet the teacher in a we-relation. The question is then – did Michael and the teacher want to meet in a we-relation? Another question looking for an answer in this connection is – what did Michael, as well as the teacher, learn from this situation? The questions cannot be answered within the scope of this paper, but we wish to encourage consideration and reflection. And Alfred Schutz may perhaps be helpful in the search for an answer?

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