

**Final report for the project *Developing the Seminar for Postgraduate Students: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach* (021/F03)**

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## **Abstract**

The seminar is the most common teaching format of the academy. It is an excellent opportunity for students to appropriate knowledge by entering a dialogue with the texts, the teachers and each other. However, we know that many academic teachers find it difficult to make seminars meaningful to themselves and their students. For fear that their seminars will turn into dreary mini-lectures, they might run in the opposite direction and risk landing in chatty and unstructured discussions without depth, and vice versa. We think there is a need for training seminar pedagogic at the university. In our project, we have tried to develop such an approach. With inspiration from a rhetorical view of dialogue and from a perspectivist conception of knowledge, we have attempted some contributions to a repertory of theoretical and practical approaches to a pedagogic for sensitive dialogical improvisation.

## Background

The seminar is one of the most important academic study forms and its importance has probably increased during the last 10-15 years. The seminar affords excellent opportunities for deliberatively exploring a field of knowledge linking theoretical insights and factual information to one's own experience of a subject matter. However, we know that many teachers look upon the seminar as rather recalcitrant. One reason may be that we rarely talk about what a seminar can actually achieve. Another reason may be that most university teachers lack good models for it. The dominating model is often the research seminar devoted to a critical examination of scientific papers. But this is a problematic ideal for a seminar in basic education, since it might confirm the social hierarchies of the academic system and the perpetuation of the established knowledge base of a discipline.

### **Rational for change and importance of the project**

As teachers of rhetoric, we have often noticed that rhetoric besides its monological uses has an under-articulated dialogical side. For that reason, we have tried to apply rhetorical theory as a didactical tool in our own seminars. This has confirmed our belief that rhetoric as a pedagogical instrument has a potential for contributing to a more focused and powerful dialogue with more fair chances for the participants. Particularly, we are interested in a dialogue that is a genuine interplay between theory and experience. Practising these insights not only in the field of rhetoric but also in different inter-disciplinary fields, we have seen that a rhetorical approach to dialogue can facilitate the learning process in other subjects as well. This discovery was the basic reason for our applying for funding to try out academic courses in seminar rhetoric at Södertörn University College and Lund University.

### **Review of relevant literature, research and theories**

In later years, several pedagogical thinkers have argued for more dialogical study forms. Among them can be mentioned the Norwegian researcher Olga Dysthe (1996, 2003), who has also brought thinkers like Habermas (1990) and Buber (1990, 1993) to the fore. We further have an influential advocate for a socio-cultural theory in the Swedish professor Roger Säljö (2000, 2005), drawing on the tradition from Vygotskij (1999). Moreover, thoughts about learning in a deliberative dialogue have been prominently put forward by another Swede, Thomas Englund (2000, 2003, 2005), and his research group. A dialogical perspective on learning can therefore hardly be claimed to be something new in modern Scandinavian pedagogical discourse.

Many teachers, however, attest that such visions are not easily put into practise. Here, a rhetorical pedagogic of dialogue could make a didactic contribution by introducing a multi-perspective view of learning with far-reaching methodical implications. A first difference between a rhetorical pedagogic of dialogue and for example Thomas Englund's deliberative dialogue theory is that

the later aims at consensus while the former has no such purpose. Another difference is that, although a didactic of rational deliberation also presupposes many perspectives on a matter, they are seen rather as a means for an enlightened choice between different standpoints than as an end in themselves. In the rhetorical pedagogic of dialogue, however, harkening back to the sophistic notions of “antilogic” and “dissoi logoi”, a multiplicity of perspectives is not just a vehicle for arriving at some transcending truth but an important goal in its own right. The very expansion of the pupils’ repertory of accessible perspectives on a matter of judgement and evaluation is seen as an important way of developing prudence as an intellectual virtue.

Within the theoretical framework of both Englund’s deliberative dialogue and Dysthe’s multi-voiced class-room, every voice is seen as the expression of an individual perspective. Together, they form a choir of personal outlooks by adding one view to another. An antilogical dialogue, on the contrary, encourages an internal change of perspective inside each participant, so that one and the same person tries several “voices”. A deliberative dialogue will eventually determine, which arguments rest on a rational ground. In an antilogical dialogue, this will not be the case. None of the shifting perspectives needs to be “the right one”, although each one can dispute the claims of the others. Thus, there is a much stronger focus on movement, on adopting new perspectives as a means of widening mental horizons and improving intellectual acumen and dialectical agility.

## **Questions**

The university teacher practices his/her profession in lectures and in seminars. Generally, the lecture is considered the more advanced activity – both reimbursement and allocation of hours bear witness to that. For this reason, seminars are often allotted to doctoral students or less qualified teachers. Few have any extensive pedagogical training for this study form, even if it is broached in pedagogical courses for academic teachers and there is a certain amount of literature with practical guidelines for beginners. As we see it, contrary to general assumptions, the seminar is a very complex and exacting activity. One reason is that the unpredictability and dialogicity of the seminar require a general preparedness by the teacher rather than specific preparations typical of a lecture. The teacher must be ready to deal with what happens in the course of the seminar in a way that is both sensitive and dynamic and to create a coherent whole out of the diverse contributions from the students. Some problems which can arise in the seminar situation are these:

- 1) The seminar tends to become a lecture. Many teachers and students testify that seminars may turn into teacher monologues. And even if the teacher asks and the students answer, this is only a sham dialogue with an essentially monological character. It is still the teacher who shares his or her knowledge with the students as mere receptors. Even a text seminar can have the same monological form, with the text in the dominant position. Instead of looking for answers in a dialogical

interplay between the text to be read and their own experience, the students turn solely to the text as an authoritative repository of a pre-given content.

2) The seminar gets superficial, lacking in depth and acuity. In the worst case, it turns into a chatty dinner-table revelation of personal experiences. Teachers complain about how the student contributions tend to be irrelevant for the purpose of the seminar, or even when relevant are merely added to each other in an haphazard way rather than woven into a coherent whole.

But sometimes neither (1) nor (2) happens. Instead, the seminar irradiates the pleasurable feeling of functioning well. Here are some different and partly overlapping descriptions of what may be going on then. The dialogue is characterized by a strong involvement by all participants. It is not only a matter of emotional presence but also of intellectual engagement. It is something more than a number of people in the same room individually attending to the same matter. It is rather a joint activity, where a shared purpose unites different approaches in order to build something to have in common. There is a definite focus. But this focus should not be seen as a pre-given starting-point. Rather, it grows out of the dialogue. Nothing which is said is predetermined. The dialogue develops freely but is at the same time structured. It is a sort of probing interchange between self-acquired experience and text-book information and theories. In this process, knowledge is transformed, refashioned and opened to new approaches. But the cognitive dynamics would not function without the dialogue, where we measure our thoughts against those of other people. We get stimulation but also resistance and the friction gives an impetus for developing our ideas.

There is an important side effect of good seminars. As a teacher, you may gradually wear-out. You think that you can give of yourself endlessly and as a consequence you get exhausted in the process. A teacher in the project told us: "What happens in a good seminar is that I get replenished as a teacher. I can use ideas from my students in my own knowledge processing. I get wiser by discussing with my students. Sometimes they have seen things that have escaped me. They also make me express myself in ways adapted to their frames of reference. That wakes me up to new ways of looking at things."

What obstacles are there to good seminars? One problem is this: the sensitivity and flexibility required for a dialogue to function well as a serious personal undertaking may seem a risky tack to a teacher. When you let go of controlling the march of ideas and do not have the seminar minutely planned in detail, there is a chance that the dialogue might derail. And this is what sometimes happens (but more seldom than teachers fear). For a teacher, it can also be a shattering experience lifting the lid which has earlier been clamped on the students critical thinking. The ensuing effect can for example express itself vociferously, in the students becoming very stubborn when proclaiming their own thoughts. Moreover, many students are not used to working in this way. For that reason, a learning period is required that can be rather taxing. Also, a certain amount of stress may be generated, when the students notice that the teacher does not have the right answers (and does not even profess to have them). On top of that, a study form can be more of a challenge than the students wish for, when it encourages them to go on trying one perspective after another instead of settling with a

“correct” way of looking at things. In this process, they can also suffer the painful experience of questioning truths they have taken for granted.

We believe, however, that there are ways of dealing with these impediments to a truly dialogical seminar. To students used to monological teaching methods a dialogical learning process may appear too chaotic. But it is possible to organize it in a more structured way, although the order of elements in it is not determined in advance. This means dealing not with linear structures but with topical structures (which might seem fussy to begin with, since students are used to linear structures for systematizing knowledge). For the teacher, it is an important task to display these topical structures and to make the students understand how this is achieved. For that reason, meta-communication is very important. The students can handle the dialogical learning process much better if they know what they do and why they do it. This recurrent meta-reflection should not be seen as an infringement upon the actual progress of the seminar. For the aim of the seminar is not only to reach a certain level of specific knowledge in a given field but also to learn generally usable forms for the production of knowledge in any field.

## Method

From the beginning our intention was to carry out parallel courses in seminar rhetoric for university teachers at our two respective seats of learning (Lund and Södertörn) and to develop a pedagogical repertory by sharing our experiences. However, since we got less funding than we had hoped for and at the same time were requested to co-ordinate the seminar project with the RHU project *Rhetoric in teacher training for scientific and technical professions* (116/G03) to be carried out at the teachers training centre in Stockholm, we opted for following different paths in the two places. The ensuing methodical variation actually proved to be quite enriching, since it revealed some interesting connections between the two projects. That made it possible for us to use them for mutually shedding light on each other by developing a number of common themes. On a practical plane, we planned the joint project in such a way that we 1) undertook courses for university teachers in pedagogic in Lund 2) took a seminar approach to our project at the teacher training centre in Stockholm 3) arranged a seminar series about the rhetorical potential of a pedagogic for dialogical learning 4) applied a seminar perspective (experimental and analytical) on our Södertörn courses in rhetoric.

### ***Procedure, students and innovations***

*1. Course on seminar pedagogic at Lund university.* At Lund university, we carried out a pedagogical course on the seminar as a study form. The course ran during the year 2005 and the spring of 2006, entitling the participants to 5 academic credits. Here, the seminar was not only as a subject-matter to discuss and reflect on but also as a practical learning tool to experiment with by trying out different seminar forms. To get a feeling for the practical requirements, the students were asked to plan and lead some of the seminars themselves. To add more perspectives, we also used visiting seminar leaders. Parts of the seminars

were video-recorded and the participants took home their own films to analyze. This meta-perspective was much appreciated by the participants as a meaningful form of self-observation. It also gave us a chance to have a closer look at details of the interaction that would otherwise have escaped us.

The course was intended not only to train the students but also to make an imprint on the seminar culture of our regular teachers. Therefore, at the end of the course, the participants invited the staff at the pedagogical department to a seminar about the good seminar.

The course led to several interesting insights. One such was an increased understanding of how teachers function as their own teaching tools. This can be explained by the fact that a teacher does not just have a professional role but also a professional personality. In many ways, this professional personality determines her ability to establish a dialogue in the class-room around a certain subject matter. Why? Because, at the same time as the subject matter puts its imprint on the teacher's professional personality is also transformed by it. For that reason, the subject is manifest to the students as it is embodied by the teacher. And according to our observations, effective learning most often occurs when both teacher and students move from the general knowledge of the textbook to specific applications on the level of personal experience.

Each of us knows from our own school-days that the teacher's professional personality can be decisive for motivating our studies. But traditionally, this has had no conspicuous place within the domain of pedagogic. It has rather been ignored as particularity of little general interest and reduced to an insignificant variable in the teaching of efficient pedagogical methods. For that reason, teachers are often presented as a homogenous and anonymous group of interchangeable professionals. This may partly explain why so many teacher candidates are unprepared for the relevance of their own voice and experience as an outstanding teaching tool. It also raises the question how pedagogical training can prepare a future teacher for the importance of her professional personality and encourage her to use and develop it as a vital part of her pedagogical repertory.

Another important insight from the project regards the dynamical interplay between three different perspectives in the teaching situation. We are dealing with a then-perspective looking back, a now-perspective concerned with the present and a then- perspective looking forward. Looking for these three perspectives is important if we want to understand teaching as a movement rather as a thing. For that end, it is necessary to establish a connection between on the one hand the concrete situation which we are in now, both in the learning process and in our life at large, and on the other hand its wider pre-history in the form of own experiences as well as the future potential of the subject-matter or the theme we are working with. If the teacher does not manage to activate these three dimensions of the didactical task, he or she runs the risk of not creating a meaningful learning situation.

*2. A seminar perspective on the project at the teachers' training college in Stockholm.*

The original purpose of the project was to find means of handling tensions between different views of knowledge and different pedagogical models, which were reported to arise when teacher candidates with a technical-scientific background study at the teachers' training college in Stockholm. As we have documented earlier (report 1167G03), the project developed a wider approach. Tensions turned out to occur on other levels as well, which also needed to be dealt with.

These other tensions became very obvious in the seminars. Particularly, there was a clash between theory and practice in the teacher training. The same discrepancy could also be noted in other academic courses, where the students are expected to acquire theories in order to use them later for solving problems of a non-technical character. Some of the problems which a seminar didactic for teaching theory must deal with are these: 1) The students tend to perceive theories as indivisible entities. Therefore, it is difficult for them to use such parts of them which may be relevant to them even if the theory in itself seems less interesting. 2) Theories are often presented in a chronological order according to their historical appearance. From that perspective, a later theory is seen against the background of defects in earlier theories. This often makes students perceive the succession of theories as a straight progression, where a later theory makes the preceding ones superfluous. In the worst case, earlier theories are reduced to a state of merely anecdotic interest. 3) Certain theories are highlighted while others are rejected as outdated or irrelevant. 4) The students tend to select *one* theory for their approval. This may be expressed in phrases like "I am socio-cultural". 5) The learning process mostly involves memorizing and to a certain extent understanding. However, it is not very creative in the sense that it encourages the students to appropriate the theories as parts of their own intellectual inventory or adopt and develop them for specific purposes or apply them to real problems instead of textbook puzzles. Even if the students can apply the theories for interpreting an example, there is often a conspicuous lack in the ability to use them creatively.

As we followed up our seminar perspective, we concentrated on the problem of making theories into tools for active reflection by the students. Here we found the so called topos theory particularly helpful. The rhetorical concept of topos literally stands for a place and indicates a visual and spatial view of how knowledge is organized. When moving about a landscape, what we see is influenced by our position in it. Also, it is possible to study a point in the landscape from several different perspectives. In the same way, what we regard as knowledge and as valid arguments is influenced by our perspective. By being linked to perspectives, topoi are conceptual nodes for conflict and concordance.

Let us see how the concept of topos relates to the didactic problem of teaching theory mentioned above. A theory consists of a complex of descriptions and basic assumptions, often of a metaphorical character. An example is the notions of "accommodation" and "assimilation" in the pedagogical theory of Jean Piaget, which both have organic parallels. As long as the students conceive of the theories as indivisible units, they find it difficult to relate critically and creatively to them. One way of handling this problem could be to pick the theories apart into their



conceptual element. But that analytical approach hardly solves the general problem. For the concepts tend to be perceived as closed and abstract entities. In that case, the pedagogical project rather becomes interpretation and application than a creative and critical dialogue with experience.

To avoid these consequences, we tried to work topically with theories instead. We did so by for instance looking at how different theories were shaped by different perspectives on the studied phenomena. Often these specific perspectives made themselves visible in the theories themselves by a figurative language that permeated them to a more or less total degree. By such means of investigation, we could get at a broader grasp of theories as rhetorical products. In this case, the metaphorical link allowed a creative meeting between the students own practical-pedagogical experiences in the class-room and the more abstract and principled approaches of the theories, which could now be used actively.

### *3. Seminar series about the potential of rhetoric for a dialogic pedagogic.*

In a later stage of the associated project at the teachers' training college in Stockholm, a seminar series for academic teachers was organized about the potential of rhetoric for a dialogical pedagogic. We met six times. The participating teachers came from several disciplines, such as religion, the history of ideas, teacher training, pedagogic, rhetoric and Swedish. These teachers confirmed that the problems described by us to a large extent could also be seen in their own fields of work. Besides providing an opportunity for academic pedagogical training, the seminar participants functioned as a focus group reflecting on the ideas and problems essential to our project against the backdrop of their own teaching experience.

### *4. Seminar perspective on our own courses on Södertörn.*

At Södertörn university college, we made two different types of studies. One type of study was based on Halliday's sociosemantic theory (Halliday & Hasan 1985) and analysed two recorded seminars in other disciplines than our own. The other type of study consisted of pedagogically experimenting with three of our own rhetorical courses.

In the first study, one seminar comprised a group of teacher students and the other a group of students in the beginning of a study program with social science as its main subject. The recordings were supplemented by an written inquiry with rather open questions. An interesting result was that the students themselves claimed feeling no restrictions for presenting their views in the seminars, at the same time as only 2/3 of them actually took the opportunity to express themselves. A somewhat unexpected finding was that the students were very conscious of the purpose of the seminars and were also able to articulate their perception of it. A common denominator was the idea that the seminar would improve their ability for critical thinking. They also have clear ideas about what distinguishes a good seminar from a bad one. Although they had not earlier had the opportunity to talk about the seminar form itself as a part of their training, they thus still had a rather distinct pre-understanding of what could reasonably be expected from it.

A problem that could be seen when examining these seminars was that many students seemed to have a difficulty fitting in their ideas with those of other participants. This inability made the seminar rather incoherent. An explanation may be that the students lacked motivation or tools for listening attentively to each other and for placing their own contributions in relation to those of the other participants. An explanation may also be that in a big group you must wait for your turn to speak. Then the conversation has time to develop in another direction, before you get a chance to talk. In this way the context may be lost. These difficulties seemed to increase the importance of the seminar leader's role. It was her or his responsibility to give structure and coherence to the dialogue and to provide conditions for building shared knowledge by following up student contributions, giving feedbacks and guiding the students through the text material.

It also became very clear that there was a social play in the seminar, which could influence the preconditions for the dialogue. On the one hand, the participants have a common prehistory shaping their attitudes to each other, to the subject-matter and to the teacher. On the other hand, there are already established status differences and hierarchies which are also reproduced and renegotiated within the seminar. That became quite obvious in the group, where male and the female students had very different debating styles, the males being much more assertive. Since these conditions can be difficult to predict, they require the teacher to have a sensitive ability of improvising for handling them.

In the second study, we turned a seminar pedagogical perspective on some of our own courses in rhetoric. The starting point was a dialogical approach already in existence. Actually, it was from that embryo that the project germinated. But we developed the concept within three of our courses: one in language philosophy, one in rhetoric on an advanced level and one in the history of rhetorical ideas. All three courses are mainly theory based. The course in language philosophy was the first to go. There the students would meet a number of important and influential theories about language. Our primary aim was not to make the students memorize what different philosophers had thought about language. Instead, we wanted them to learn how to philosophize about language themselves. For that purpose, we tried a topical approach. Practically, that meant going about like this. When we studied a theory, we did not approach it as an indivisible unit. Instead, we looked inside it for central fields of unity and disunity, that is topoi. Often they could be spotted in recurring metaphors or in crucial stories or examples. Clues could thus be found in the linguistic choices of a certain thinker. When we found these topoi, the students could use them to find out how their own experience of language was reflected in them.

In the course in rhetorical didactics, we used a similar method. We tried to problematize different pedagogical topoi, as above. But here we also varied the seminar discussions with other practical exercises – like letting the students try the consequences of different topoi when planning lessons or examinations. In the course of the history of rhetorical ideas we decided to implement the basic rhetorical assumption that language and knowledge are indissolubly united and changed our pedagogic so that the students could “talk themselves” into the knowledge. This resulted in the course, at the same time as being a course in the

history of pedagogical ideas, also becoming a course in seminar rhetoric. Consequently, the students were examined not only on the knowledge on rhetorical ideas but also on their ability to communicate in better ways. As a part of the pedagogical attempt, the students themselves lead sections of the seminars. Each seminar ended in a meta-discussion, where teachers and students reflected on the working process and the rhetorical forms of the seminar. Although this had for a consequence, that the students became weaker in abilities like correctly quoting from the handbook and relating the right thought to the right thinker, their own ability developed to use the thoughts they had met creatively and critically in their own problem solving.

## Results and discussion

For us, the project has been a very valuable experience, once again drawing our attention to the importance of all learning being anchored in the individual student. We cannot learn things which are of no concern to us, and to create a motivation for that is a vital task for a teacher. That underscores the importance of adapting teaching to the individual student at the same time as it also sees teaching as highly social.

We have further realised that one of the most important preconditions for being a good seminar leader is to understand that a seminar cannot be planned in detail. Therefore, a teacher must be prepared for the unexpected. That may sound as a irresponsible *laissez-faire* attitude. But as we see it, the only solution is for a teacher to equip himself or herself for well-structured and reflected improvisation.

The question is how you do it. We think that we have seen some possible paths that we would like to try out. A dream that we nurture is that the exploration of these paths could be an important part of teacher training and of pedagogical training for the university.

Our results are partly practical and partly theoretical. We think that we have developed an embryo to a pedagogical repertory for handling co-existing perspectives in university seminars, but the work has also led to more practical results. One is a concept for pedagogical training in seminar pedagogic at the academic level that we want to develop further. Another one is a different way of doing courses which we are presently involved in and a third one is a wider discussion of the pedagogical challenges and possibilities of the seminar.

The seminar project has also had a number of indirect side effects. One essential to us is that we have been granted research funding from the Baltic Foundation for a project on topical learning. The idea for that project came up within the framework presented here. Another consequence are plans for a course in seminar rhetoric as a permanent element in the pedagogical curriculum of the university. A third consequence is that the project has led to meetings with teachers in other subjects, who have taken an interest in this field. The project has also given inspiration to a research application concerning the form and practice of the academic seminar in different European countries.

Let us conclude by drawing some conclusions regarding topical learning and topical didactics.

### *Topical learning*

To begin with, a topical view of learning is dialogical and social. It assumes learning to take place, when a learner's well-known and familiar horizon of understanding meets another perspective. This idea is not new, of course. What happens could be described as an adaptive process in Piaget's sense of the word (referring to his concepts of assimilation and adaptation). Rhetorically, we can instead describe the process in terms of *dissoi logi*, "different words", where closed views are broken up by opposite meanings questioning each other. And this takes place via *topoi*, "dialectical meeting places", which are nodes for common values transcending oppositions and tensions. In a conflict for instance, a common topic can be "justice". Both parties may agree that this is an important value but still have different views of what it entails. In a metapedagogical discourse, *topoi* could be "learning objectives" and "equivalence". These *topoi* as well display ideological and educational tensions.

To enact education, we must have spatial places to attend. But we must also have more or less tangible places for our thoughts to meet. These places must contain something which we can all "see", which we can perceive, feel and take an interest in. In the simplest case, it is an object which the teacher holds up, a thing well-known to the pupils and which all can speak about. But in most cases, it is an experience, in which everyone can share. It gives us something to focus on. In that way, it functions as a *topos*.

It may seem that this way of working does not differ from working thematically. But a topical didactics is more anchored in the question and less in the title. In the contradictory pair *verba* (words) and *res* (things), the theme belongs to *verba* and the *topos* more to *res*. We are often used to meeting rhetoric as the linguistic dress of our thought, but that is a very reduced picture. One of the great rhetorical projects throughout time has been trying to unite *res* and *verba*.

### *Topical didactics*

Topical didactics has several distinctions: 1) It works "bottom-up". Thus, it sets out from own experiences and tries rising to established "scientific" knowledge. 2) It builds bridges. It tries to change and enrich a given mode of thought but dialectically uniting different perspectives. 3) It works by "turning" its objects of examination. 4) It strives for "transformation" of something already given rather than addition of knowledge. 5) It stresses the historical element in our thinking, that our way of looking at things is always conditioned by cultural and social factors.

The principle for a topical didactic is thus not adding new knowledge to old knowledge but bringing out potential knowledge which is already there. That, of course, usually requires that the pupil is provided with new knowledge, but this becomes interesting by a "catalytic" rather than an incremental effect. There is a similarity between the topical didactics and Piaget's genetical epistemology, but there is a difference as well, since our approach is not cognitivistic but rhetorical.

Further, we view the search for knowledge itself as the primary instrument for accommodation in a didactical situation.

We further agree with the sociocultural pedagogics represented by for instance Roger Säljö, but by using our rhetorical tool-kit we try to make its didactical sense more clear.

We have in common with Vygotskij that we believe in a collective learning, where we get our instruments of thought from each other. But we differ from him in our perspectivistic view of the learning process, i.e. that knowledge contains a *copia*, an access to many views. For this view, topos is a key concept. A topos is nothing if it cannot appear in different perspectives.

To approach learning from the point of view of a topical didactics means 1) to see knowledge as a tool 2) to test knowledge as possible standpoints. Here we wish to emphasize that we do not refer to instrumental tools but tools for reflection and taking a stance.

The starting point in the didactic process is normally the concrete. For the concrete can always be theorized. Topoi can help us theorize everyday experience, since a topical approach will use analogies for seeing or establishing connections. Further, topoi always exist in a context. To topicalize is to contextualize. In that way, topoi will be a bridge not only between theory and practice but also between the concrete and the abstract.

But you can also move in the opposite direction. Let us say that you have a theoretical notion, which you may find understandable in itself. But you have difficulty making it meaningful as a tool for your own thinking. It does not seem very relevant to you. This is often due to the fact that it does not exist in a context of your own experience. Connecting it to a topos is a way of finding such a context.

Let us make some more claims about topoi and topical learning. We list them without any particular order:

a) Topoi can unite the general with the concrete or the specific. That is not equal to what happens when you illustrate a concept with an example. For with regard to a topos, an example is not something external but something internal. It is already inside the topos itself.

b) Topos is a creative knowledge procedure, where the pupil is a participant.

c) Unlike general concepts, topoi invite an inductive and abductive way of reasoning and not only to a deductive one. That makes topoi a creative starting point for dialogues.

d) Topoi are also characterized by containing tensions, contradictions. From a didactical point of view, this feature is important. The contradictions do not need sorting out so as to be dissolved, as when you handle logical notions. In stead, you have to make them fruitful from a perspectivist approach.

e) Topoi lead to a negotiatory view of knowledge. Their immanent tensions cannot be handled by logical elimination but only by a deliberation which creates a balance between them (which may shift from case to case).

f) Topoi are associated with a dynamic view of knowledge. By using topoi, the students develop not primarily knowledge but an ability to make knowledge, that is to understand and make knowledge usable as their “own”.

g) Topoi are not something which is but something which we do. They belong in the realm of a metaphysics of action.

h) A topical didactics can create anguish, if the students are not used to such an open way of working but expect to get fixed answers. Many perspectives do not make life easier, they make it more difficult. But also richer.

## Publications

- Åsa Brumark, 2006. Det högskolepedagogiska seminariet som genre och utmaning. En jämförelse mellan två seminariegrupper. I Ledin, P., Lind Palicki, L., Melin, Ch., Nilsson, G., Wirdenäs, C. och Åsbrink, H. (red), *Svenskans beskrivning 28*, Humanistiska institutionen, Örebro universitet.
- Åsa Brumark (in press) Seminariet som arbetsform och kunskapskälla. Studenters och lärares svar på enkäter. I *Att vetenskapliggöra Lärarprofessionen*. Ämnesdidaktisk rikskonferens i Karlstad 17-18 mars 2005.
- Lennart Hellspång, 2006. Giambattista Vico och idén om en retorisk didaktik. I: *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 36.
- Lennart Hellspång, 2006. Retorisk kritik som pedagogisk metod. I: *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 36.
- Tina Kindeberg (in press) Vältalig, klok och vis. *KRUT*.
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