



Sketch of lecture room, Helsingö, 2007  
From Kersti Sandin Bülow's doctoral project in the Design/  
Interior Architecture department at HDK - School of  
Design and Crafts at the University of Gothenburg:  
Meetings at work: spatial intervals for unbounded dialogues.

*In the autumn of 2007, Sven-Eric Liedman, professor of history of ideas at the university of Gothenburg, gave a talk for teachers and researchers. We have chosen to reproduce his presentation for several reasons: it gives a perspective on research educations, on what should be re-functioned within the university so that artistic research can be enhanced but also on the spatial aspects of research. How should the meeting spaces, the seminar room, the library, the infrastructure of this kind of research that is so disparate and field orientated, be arranged?*

**”There will always be those that slam on the brakes and say this is wrong...”**

On education and research in the humanities and art

Sven-Eric Liedman

What I will talk about is the problem of education: undergraduate education, research education, and research. It is important to remember that I approach this from a particular position, as I am, above all, an old professor and supervisor from the department of history of ideas.

I do not exactly know how many doctoral students I have supervised during the years, but my guess is there have been at least thirty, so it is an experience that I have had a lot of. Apart from that, I have my own personal interest in research education. I should also mention that towards the end of this presentation, I will get closer to the field that you are working in, that in recent years I was enlisted as, in what in fine language is called, a scientific supervisor for a research student based at The University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre in Stockholm, whose work was a part of a project called Aesthetic Learning Processes. It is a project that has seen many problems and conflicts, but also some of the possibilities inherent in this kind of work. I therefore aim to conclude this presentation with these present experiences. The young man, whose name is Per Zetterfalk, will hopefully finish his dissertation during this year.

I would like to begin with a general problem concerning education and research, namely the conception that they are related in some way. One cannot speak about this without mentioning an old honoured name in this context. His name is constantly used and misused: Old Humboldt. To be exact, Wilhelm, the elder of the brothers Humboldt. Not Alexander, the man behind the Humboldt currents, the Humboldt penguins and the book on the Cosmos. But rather Wilhelm, who was a linguist and polyglot, who during his life mastered numerous languages. There is a note from Chateaubriand, the French poet and diplomat, who visited Humboldt in Berlin at the time when he had just left an extensive political and diplomatic career behind him. Chateaubriand wrote that 'it was odd to be in the Humboldt household. Wilhelm has lost all his power, and now he sits and speaks Modern Greek and Sanskrit with his daughter. Why does he learn all those languages when you can speak French?'

\*

Humboldt devoted himself to the Philosophy of Language. He was born an aristocrat in Berlin and was handpicked for the position as a kind of Undersecretary for Education during the period when Prussia was largely conquered by Napoleon's troops. The French had taken Berlin, the Polish government had been forced to move further east to Königsberg, (which is Kaliningrad today), so the issue was: what was Prussia to do? Their military had no chance against the French and their economy was nothing compared to the British, but they had education, science, research, universities, and skills, and that was their best bet. Humboldt was an odd figure, a linguist and a philosopher suddenly given the task of organising a whole educational system.

It was during this time, in 1804, that state schools were opened in Prussia, the first country to do this, far before it occurred in Sweden for instance. During this period he also had the opportunity to convince the king into founding a new kind of university (according to Humboldt) in Berlin, where there previously had not been one. There had been universities in Europe for hundreds of years, but they so far had only one obligatory assignment, to teach (not to conduct research). We have to remember that there were many researchers that had posts for long and short periods at universities, such as Sir Isaac Newton who was based at Cambridge for many years, and Carl von Linné who was in Uppsala for a long period. Prominent researchers, to say the least, but research was not included in their assignments, their only duty was to teach.

What was new, was that Humboldt argued that both research and teaching should be obligatory. He posited that there should be possibilities to conduct research in every subject at the university (or at every professor's chair as it was called at that time). In the natural sciences there should be laboratories, or other means to do research, while within the humanities there should be seminars. The seminar form had begun to evolve, which involved teachers and students sitting and working together, discussing their subject. It was a work environment that had been practised for some time. However, Humboldt's seminar was not reduced to this form of working together, there was also the library and other spaces required for working. In the humanities' equivalent to the laboratory, it was important that one learnt the job, it was important to learn how to do research. The idea was to begin with pre-seminars where you were taught how to work with references, simple things such as writing footnotes, and from there proceed to more advanced assignments.

The Humboldt program was a huge success and has become a part of university ideology. The rectors in Europe and the rest of the world came together in Bologna (which managed to appoint itself the worlds oldest university founded in 1088, a fact that does not have many good reasons to actually believe in, even if it is fun with jubilees) for something, which in a grand manner, is called the Magna Charta of the Universities. There, it was pronounced that it has always been the role of the universities to teach and carry out research, which is a lie.

In Sweden, it has only been obligatory since 1852, and in England even later. But what does Humboldt mean when he says that research and education should be connected? It is simply that he was influenced by the ideas of his time concerning progress, in many ways he was a man of the age of enlightenment. He imagined that progress was the natural condition for humanity and that the dynamics of progress could be found in knowledge, that knowledge is the motor for an infinite process. He believed that knowledge is not absolute, rather as soon as you solve one problem it instantly triggers new questions. There is therefore no final end for research, according to Humboldt.

The same applies for the individual human being: she or he can also develop infinitely. Consequently there is no comprehensive education, rather you must learn and develop continuously. Humboldt's aim was that the whole schooling system should be organised according to this idea. First, there would be a state school, where children would learn according to Pestalozzi's programme, where children should not play, they should learn where knowledge is something very tangible. A model for learning for the first years at school was carried out in Prussia by Humboldt.

Later at the gymnasium one should gain certain fundamental types of knowledge, and Humboldt mentions three types: The first is language, and preferably classical Greek as it is a language so rich in conjugations that it affects the mind in a positive way. Humboldt's idea was that you can manage a complex reality if you have the right tools to think with. The second is mathematics, which has exactly the same purpose as language. You can organise and structure reality with the aid of mathematics, and with these means, reach new layers of reality. Humboldt speaks much less about history, but history is, according to him, the third main area of knowledge necessary at the gymnasium. History is necessary because it has the possibility to give an understanding of humanity and human potential. Through history you receive an orientation of where we came from, how far we have come and how to proceed.

Humboldt's education system remained paramount in central Europe, the Soviet Empire also conserved a lot of Humboldt's beliefs. If you take a person from the generation after Lukács in Hungary, such as Agnes Heller, Humboldt's ideas (that in order to understand contemporary society, you need to lift yourself out of your history) are very present for her. The models for Humboldt, came from the old Greeks and a range of other figures. But at the same time, for the human race to advance, he argued that we have to know at what point we are now.

\*

Art was constantly present in Humboldt's surroundings. He was alive at a time between The Enlightenment, *Sturm und Drang*, and the romantic period, a time when aesthetics really occupied intellectuals. Humboldt himself speaks

very little on this issue, which is rather odd; perhaps the issue was obvious to him. Friedrich Schiller was an important person to Humboldt. They spent a lot of time together, while Schiller was still living in Jena and Humboldt was a young student there. Schiller was always extremely contemptuous towards the young Humboldt. Why? Nobody really knows. However, it was a very uneven relationship. But apart from this, art and aesthetics are certainly dimensions present when Humboldt speaks of the importance of knowledge in history. History cannot be imagined without art, and is considered, as language, to be one of the important pillars of education. Yet he doesn't give art an independent place at his gymnasium. His view was that only a person that had first passed through the Pestalozzian schooling, and after that, the gymnasium, is mature enough to choose his or her own path of education.

Further, Humboldt's university was distinguished by two very important aspects: *Lehrfreiheit*, that is the teachers' right to teach any scientific theses that they might have gained during their research, and *Lernfreiheit*, that is the students' freedom to choose their studies and even their teachers. This system worked quite well in Berlin University, which was a big university with both humanities and natural sciences. During this period it became the leading university in the world, its dominance lasting perhaps fifty years. There you had a range of different teachers, and the students were encouraged to, so to speak, vote with their feet. They went to the professors or readers they found to be the best.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Berlin, one could find the great Mr *Ordinarius*, namely Wilhelm Dilthey, who is still influential when it comes to discussing the relationship between science and art, but he was not an inspiring teacher, and had few students. While, Georg Simmel, who came from a Jewish background, and never gained a professorship other than in the periphery of the German empire (as there existed a structural anti-Semitism at the university) had many students.

I still believe it is extremely important that you have the option to choose your teacher in research programmes, but the entire Humboldt ideology could never be realised, and has remained only an ideal. Humboldt quickly disappeared from his appointment at the Ministry of Home Affairs, and as a diplomat he negotiated in Vienna. But when reactionary winds blew in over Prussia, he became unusable and retired to his estate. Learned a few more languages, and wrote a book about, what was then known as, Javanese.

\*

The ideology itself was difficult to realise, since Humboldt's requirements could be used as a straightjacket on many issues. Instead of liberating ideas, it often became restraining. Humboldt used the concept of '*Bildung*' as a central concept for the university and in this context it was entirely new. The endless process that is implied in '*Bildung*' is important in his thinking about education.

However, when it came to operationalising the concept in the university, '*Bildung*' often simply became the art of mastering a certain canon, that is, that one should know a certain amount of Greek, which later became Latin, a language Humboldt despised deeply because he found it so limited. (Later, when this view entirely dominated the universities, Nietzsche revolted against it.) In addition, the concept can disintegrate further, '*Bildung*' can sometimes

be turned into an issue of table manners. “He eats in such an uncultivated manner”, you hear people say.

However, the idea that education and research should be related in the university is still alive, and I can see the importance of this idea. However, when discussing this relationship, people tend to interpret it very differently. And I just want to mention here a few of the problems that can arise, especially when discussing connections between research and undergraduate studies. You can choose to highlight the issue in different ways, and I will differentiate between three different ideals.

\*

The most general interpretation is that the teacher should have completed a research program, and therefore have experience in research. The point here is that the teacher should know how to formulate a scientific problem, and be knowledgeable of the possibilities integrated in this. Another approach is that teachers should be active researchers, able to share their research results during their lectures. The third approach is that the students, studying at any level, should at least, in the periphery, follow an actual research process.

Often you hear of one or the other of these approaches, but what Humboldt intended was the third and most difficult approach and that presupposes that the other approaches are fulfilled. This ideal can be difficult to realise in many contexts, even if it is the best way to convey anything essential about what research is.

There is another difference between education at an undergraduate level and research education that I find interesting, but is seldom talked about, that students at undergraduate level often stay at the institution for a short period of time. This differs in different disciplines, and in artistic educations this is usually a longer process. But in the humanities, where my experience lies, people usually stay two to three semesters, and only rarely longer than that.

If you are good at getting to know people, you can get to know short-term people at the institution. Research educations have the advantage that people stay for a longer period of time; and particularly as a supervisor you get to know the students as people in a mutual relatively long-term relationship. Sometimes it can lead to unpleasant conflicts, but most of the time it is a productive process for both parties.

\*

One has to remember that one can learn from all kinds of students, even from those who are just there for a guest appearance, lasting one or two semesters. Every autumn and spring I give a lecture to the students studying at the Teacher Education Program. To meet three hundred and fifty people for two hours does not lead to any deep personal relationships, but funnily enough, there are always ten to fifteen people that come forward afterwards to talk and later send emails with questions and so on.

Earlier, in the humanities, people could work fifteen to twenty years on their dissertations, some as ‘sleeping’ students with only some activity. This kind of relationship leads to a sharing process, you share the work you are doing, and it becomes a mutual process. You learn so much from students, and in particular

those doctoral students, that you work with over a long period. It is important to remember this. That you are also involved in a learning process, this is the endless learning that Humboldt talks about.

\*

At last I have reached the point where I will discuss art education and research, which is not a new idea, it has existed for quite a long time (the idea of research as an essential part of art practice, would have not been a strange thought for Humboldt, even though he never developed this idea which has become so central in Sweden in recent years.) Jan Ling from The University of Gothenburg had similar ideas during the 70s, but there has been strong resistance against them. On one side the resistance came from the old university, particularly from the humanities; with the argument that it will not lead to research or science of good quality. Even the art world questioned what would this lead to. I will speak from my limited experience, from the margins (the research school at Aesthetic Learning Processes, which has its base in Stockholm, started with great enthusiasm some years ago with people admitted to the program from the University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre, University College of Arts Crafts and Design, The Royal Collage of Music in Stockholm etc). I remember that I was invited, just as they began their work, to speak about knowledge and at that point everything seemed to be at peace, then suddenly a young man named Per Zetterfalk contacted me, telling me that the research school was a complete catastrophe for him.

He had earlier worked with film and theatre and wanted to use this experience in his research, and he wanted to write a dissertation where he could combine a scientific approach with artistic practice. To me this sounded like an obvious aim for his work. However, he had apparently met compact resistance from the leadership of the research school, because they held the position that there should only be traditional academic written dissertations there. I cannot understand this position when we already have cinema and theatre studies as disciplines. There is no point having a doctoral student at the University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre writing something that is just another version of work done at other institutions. I thought he was completely right, and this led to several complications. He already had an artistic supervisor, Suzanne Osten, who was very enthusiastic about his project, and then I came in as a supervisor, working from my perspective.

\*

This resulted in a double command that was both exciting and fun, but I can also see that problems came up as a consequence, because those who at one point in time had taken the initiative had not entirely thought through how this kind of work should be organised. There was no clear idea about what is actually involved in starting an education with a doctoral student at the University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre. His work consisted of closely following a theatre production, *Kyla* (A sombre play about a murder, where a deviant is beaten to death by a group of young men), by Lars Norén and making a documentary film, which was screened at the Gothenburg Film festival last spring. In order to get another perspective on his main question

1. Henrik Karlsson is a Swedish musicologist, specialising in questions of artistic research. His book *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss*, Stockholm 2002, is an important work of reference in the Nordic countries.

about artistic creativity, he also followed the awful docu-soap, *Riket*.

So, on one hand we have an artist like Norén, who almost like a sovereign, controls his process, and on the other hand ninety people that are suddenly supposed to cooperate around some kind of concept. What kind of creative processes can you find here? He also tried to use his own experience as a filmmaker, and in his text reflects on its relationship to the discussion on what research is, in immediate connection to artistic development. Here he refers to Henrik Karlsson<sup>1</sup> and his inquiry into what kind of research one can imagine within art.

I found the work extremely interesting, taking the combination of Zetterfalk, an experienced theatre and film person, and me, with a certain experience of research within the humanities and supervision of written dissertations. The collaboration has worked very well. Though, having said this, anyone who assesses the work has to be open to the fact that this is necessarily something new.

The resistance that exists against artistic research is the same kind of resistance surgeons met, who during the 17th century, were looked upon with contempt by members of the faculty of medicine. When the surgeons wanted to gain access to the Fellowship of Academics within medicine, they were met with harsh resistance. Old Israel Hwasser, professor of medicine in Uppsala in the 19th century, questioned why these simple craftsmen with their skills should be welcomed into the Academic Fellowship. Today, in the faculty of medicine, these craftsmen are ranked the highest. Today there is nothing finer than the great transplant surgeons.

On the contrary, the more spiritual types, such as Hwasser, are not so esteemed anymore. The process of accepting new subjects and fields into the academic circle, after initial resistance, is repeated over and over again. When the social sciences were developing, they were met with the same resistance from the humanities. "What is this? They are working with the wrong things, they are really just practitioners." I can see the same reaction today from the humanities; the new intruders being the artists that have nothing to do with science.

It is easier for me to speak about the humanities, as I constantly have this kind of person around me. There are always those that slam on the brakes, and say - this is wrong. Obviously preparedness is needed from the opposite end, to say this is something that obviously can be done, since it creates reactions. I have heard a lot about a meeting in Stockholm a couple of years ago, where so many assembled to listen to Henrik Karlsson presenting his important message concerning what kind of research could be imagined within art. There were many there from different art universities that said: "This would not lead to good art, this does not belong here." This is not *our* task...

*Translated by Emma Corkhill*

*A special 'thank you' to the project secretary, Royner Norén, who with a unique feeling for content, nuances, and message, during a period of two years, recorded, wrote down, and documented our conferences.*