Culture, Identity and Interaction in the Literature Classroom

The teaching of literature and literary history has been narrowly linked to the building of the nation state and the development of a national cultural identity during the 19th century (Conrad 1991, Perkins 2005). Today culture and identity are still central concepts in the school curriculum in a Danish context of education. In the preamble of the Danish primary and lower secondary school (Folkeskolen) the development of students’ personal and cultural identity is stated as one of the main aims of schooling next to education for democratic citizenship.

Within literature studies the question of culture is often linked with the national identity of the author, the social, ethnical or religious background of the student and with the literary text seen as a cultural artifact. But the underlying concept of culture which has formed the curriculum and the research field seems too static to hold the complex situation in the literature classroom where different cultural practices and contexts of understanding meet and interact.

This paper will address the question of culture in the literature classroom and discuss the possibilities of basing classroom practice on a dynamic and analytical conception of culture (Hastrup 2011) turning the gaze from authors, texts and backgrounds to contexts of understanding and positions in classroom interaction (Langer 2005).

The empirical basis of the paper is a study carried out in connection with my Ph.D. dissertation (Rørbech 2013). The data was collected with qualitative methods and consist of document analysis, teacher interviews and classroom observations conducted in four Danish literature classrooms in 7th to 9th grade.

Culture takes many forms in literature classrooms, and each perspective on culture is connected with special pedagogical aims and interests. The distinction between specialized and non-specialized reading cultures (Hetmar 2004) points at reflections on how students become specialized readers. Methods, concepts and genres play a central role in this approach. But another way of seeing culture in literature classrooms is to turn the gaze to the worldviews, values and discourses involved in the meaning making processes, and to the search for a (common) ground for interpretations. The pedagogical goal will then slightly change because this focus points at reflections on reader identities and frames of interpretations.

Inspired by the dynamic and performative concepts of culture in poststructuralist (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2004) and social semiotic (Kramsch 2009; 2006; 1998; 1993, Gee 2005) approaches the paper will investigate an alternative perspective on culture in the literature classroom. Positioning theory (Harré and Davis 1990) will be used to analyze the positioning of the students and to see (Walcott 1999) classroom interaction as negotiations of meaning, identity and cultural contexts of understanding (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2004). From within this theoretical framework the paper will focus on the interplay between different reader positions and contexts of understanding in classroom dialogue.
The Georgian researcher Marc Faust points at two root metaphors concerning the framing of classroom interaction: the courtroom and the marketplace (Faust 2000). However, both ways of orchestrating communication in classrooms fail to challenge students’ cultural contexts of understanding, he argues. Therefore he suggests an alternative, ‘the reconstructed marketplace’, which refers to classrooms where interpretation is seen as the construction of common cultural and social intertexts (ibid.). But this communicative ideal may, even though it is closely connected with esteemed intentions such as dialogical interaction and democratic education, occur only now and then in empirical classrooms. In order to obtain a critical and reflective approach to culture in the literature classroom the scaffolding of an interaction which allows change of perspective, reflection on reader positions and exploration of contexts for understanding will be needed.

With the starting point in the analysis of a short incident from a literature classroom potentials and challenges in basing literature teaching on a performative and dynamic concept of culture will be discussed. And the question of how this concept of culture might impact the literature pedagogy and how it can lead to a reflective and critical approach to culture will be addressed.

At the end of the presentation the paper will return to the starting point and reflect on how literature teaching might benefit from a double concept of culture, which embraces authors, texts, student backgrounds, and different cultural contexts of understanding in classroom practice. And the paper will draw the conclusion that a dynamic concept of culture in empirical classrooms implicates reflections on the framing of classroom dialogue, negotiations of reader identities, and highlights classroom interaction in literature pedagogy.

Bibliography


