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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Kelly, P., & Dorf, H. (2016). Snapshots of language and literature teaching in Denmark and England. *Education 3-13*, 44(6), 727-735. DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2015.1009146

Publication metadata

Title:	Snapshots of language and literature teaching in Denmark and England
Author(s):	Peter Kelly & Hans Dorf
Journal:	Education
DOI/Link:	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.1009146
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Snapshots of language and literature teaching in Denmark and England
Peter Kelly¹ and Hans Dorf² submitted to *Education 3-13*

Keywords: Danish teaching, English teaching, language and literature teaching, lower secondary teaching, comparative pedagogy

ABSTRACT To illustrate differences in lower secondary level language and literature teaching we contrast a typical teaching episode in Denmark with one in England. Both reflect the dominant discourses in each country alongside recent policy initiatives, and each exemplifies a different orientation to language and literature teaching focussing on performance in England and a personal formation in Denmark. Descriptions of the episodes are linked to wider debates and potential areas for further consideration are identified.

Introduction

From 2009 until 2011 we worked with language and literature teachers in Denmark and England. The English teachers all worked in state community colleges whilst the Danish teachers also taught in public schools called *folkeskoler*. Each teacher was observed twice teaching pupils aged 12-13 years and interviewed on each occasion. The range of goals towards which teachers worked and the actions these prompted were identified and clustered to construct teacher roles which provided a view of pedagogy in each country. The outcomes of this study have been published elsewhere (Dorf et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2013a; 2013b). In what follows we describe two typical teaching episodes to contrast teaching and the values and understandings underpinning it, which together we call pedagogy, between these two countries.

Contrasting perspectives on schooling in Denmark and England

For the most part, the English state schools tradition promotes individualised, child-centred teaching and regards children as requiring different types and levels of schooling (Goodson and Lindblad, 2011). Danish schools, however, place a high importance on the group rather than the individual and value greatly a close relationship between a class teacher and one group of pupils (Ravn, 2002; Osborn, 2004). The dominant goal of English schools has become promoting student attainment on national tests because of the importance placed by bodies such as Ofsted on the comparison of student test scores (Ball, 2008). So, whilst national tests at age 13-14 years were scrapped at the end of 2008, many schools continue to make use of what are now optional tests produced by the government (DFE, 2013). Educating for democracy has dominated as a goal for schools in Denmark since the 1970s. However teachers are also coming under increasing pressure to improve students' performance on national tests, introduced in 2010 (Andreassen and Hjørne, 2013). But unlike in England where tests are standardised and traditional in format, Danish tests are individualised, adaptive and computer-based (Ministeriet for Børn og Undervisning, 2010). Danish is tested in this way at age 13-14 years.

Teaching episodes

Language and literature teaching in England: war poetry

The school in which this episode takes place was identified by local advisors as having consistently high levels of success in published English examination results. It is situated in a seaside town in SW England with a socially mixed catchment. Pupils attending are largely white British. The school was

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graded outstanding in its most recent Ofsted inspection. Pupils are divided into separate classes or sets, according to their attainment, of about 25 students; this episode concerns a middle set. The teacher is female and has five years teaching experience. She is a specialist English teacher and an Advanced Skills Teacher with a wider staff development role across the local authority.

This year 8 English lesson takes place in the spring term and lasts 50 minutes. The lesson begins with the teacher introducing the class to a new poetry module which, she says, will run over several lessons. She then shares the specific objectives of the lesson with the children using an interactive white board. These are:

- (1) To develop an understanding of the poem Anthem for Doomed Youth by Wilfred Owen
- (2) To explore how this poem relates to the social, historical and cultural context in which it was written
- (3) To look at how Owen uses language and rhetorical, grammatical and literary features influence the reader

The teacher then says:

. . . a lot of students lack confidence in order to say what they feel about a poem because it might be wrong, so we're going to try to move away from the idea that there is a right or wrong answer to be able to engage with our own emotions and think how it affects us as individuals.

She then asks, 'What is poetry?' As pupils respond she firmly marks their responses. To those she approves of such as, 'It says how we feel', and 'It makes us look at things differently', she says, 'wonderful, absolutely perfect; images, emotion, isn't it'. However she is less enthusiastic about other responses including, 'They rhyme', and 'It has to have a rhythm', saying for example, 'OK, that's interesting'. Thus she implicitly grades the worth of answers and their closeness to her ideal.

For the next ten minutes the teacher questions the children on what they know about the Great War, and for a further ten minutes shows photographs of the trenches with descriptions of what it was like there, before outlining a brief biography of war poet Wilfred Owen.

Now the teacher introduces a way of analysing a poem. These, she says, will help the children work at level 7 (a national curriculum level which is intended to reflect an above average attainment for a 13-14 year old). She tells the children to start by looking at the all of the words used in the poem and finding out their meanings. Next they should look for the poet's use of several techniques: first rhetorical questions; then personification; after that alliteration and onomatopoeia; and finally juxtaposition, metaphors and similes. She then passes out a copy of the poem 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' by Wilfred Owen, and for the next ten minutes the children have to read through the poem together in pairs, highlighting any unknown words and discussing with each other their meanings. The teacher then asked pairs to share their thoughts with the whole class, highlighting unknown words on a projection of the poem on the interactive white board along and a discussion ensues as the teacher scribes the meanings offered by other students.

The lesson proceeds as the teacher asked the pairs of children to highlight, first, words with violent warlike associations, and then words which describe sounds, and examples of alliteration, onomatopoeia, metaphors and similes. Again after a short period pairs share their thoughts with the whole class, as the teacher highlights and makes notes on the projected poem, and a brief discussion follows, during which the teacher says, 'People who are getting level 7s refer to evidence from their texts'. At the end of the discussion she says, 'Good, you will soon be working at GCSE grade C level'. GCSEs are the public examinations students will take at age 15-16 years, and a grade C equates to national curriculum level 7.

Finally the teacher talks to the whole class, breaking the poem down line by line on the whiteboard, to illustrate the analytic approach: 'What passing bells for those who die as cattle?' a rhetorical question; 'Only the monstrous anger of the guns' personification; 'Only the stuttering rifles rapid rattle' onomatopoeia and alliteration. She then returns to the lesson objectives, asks the students to give her a thumbs up for each one if they feel it has been met, and ticks them off with a

flourish as they do so. For homework the children are asked to re-read the poem and go through this whole process for themselves.

After the lesson the teacher discussed her aims for the poetry module in terms of five areas of expertise that students would acquire. These included, 'to develop your ability to engage with meanings within poems independently' and 'to be able to articulate and justify personal responses to poems', which would lead to her offering pupils the opportunity 'to use emotive imagery as a basis to create your own poetry'. She noted that this was 'a nice bit of the module, mainly we are focusing on reading, but [at the end] we are also going to do some of our own poetry'. And when asked why it is important to teach poetry, the teacher cited Ofsted:

... because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it. (Ofsted, 2007: 6)

Yet she finds that pupils seldom show sufficient commitment to their studies:

What is happening at the moment, the more support we give them, the less responsible they feel ... because there is a shift towards the teacher and away from the student ... we are chasing up homework and course work, we ring at home, we go to the home to pick it up, because we are ultimately accountable.

But she does this because she feels responsible for helping her students do their best:

I start talking to them about GCSE and where they are going. The children's GCSE exams are three years off, and, frankly, GCSE English is the most important GCSE alongside maths. They need to get 5 grade Cs; there are some scary statistics about unemployment and life chances if they don't.

Thoughts on this lesson

The lesson described above is representative of much of the other English language and literature lessons seen (Kelly et al., 2013a; 2013b). The work of the teacher is primarily orientated towards helping the students improve at working on the poem in order to demonstrate their attainment. Hence her focus is on developing their skills and preparing them for future performance. Exam performance is assumed also to reflect students' development of functional skills, regarded as a box of tools. This separation of learning before application is reflected in her comments after the lesson where engaging in meanings and articulating responses come before creating poems, although the quote from Ofsted which she offers hints at more than this.

To achieve these goals the teacher adopts a coaching approach focussed on working along inflexible, well defined curricular paths towards predefined ends, often defined as either right or wrong. This approach is aided by hour-long, highly structured lessons based in a mastery learning model and dominated by the teacher's micro-management of pupils' attention towards meeting specific objectives, broken down into small steps and assessed instantly. Whole class teaching and directed paired or individual work on common tasks are seen as appropriate for classes which are set for attainment.

In this, it is clear that accountability pressures lead the teacher to feel responsible for student learning. This creates a tension when supervising individual and group work when students are required to take responsibility for completing their work.

Language and literature teaching in Denmark: the Leper colony

The school in which this episode takes place was identified by local advisors as being particularly successful in language and literature teaching. It is situated in a town environment of mixed suburban character in central Denmark, and has a socially mixed catchment. It caters for primary- and lower-secondary-aged students aged 6–16. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes of about 20 students by class teachers who follow a group of children through the school for a number of years. Most students have been with the same classmates since starting school. The teacher is

female, has 8 years teaching experience and specialises in teaching Danish, although she is also responsible for a number of other subjects and students' pastoral development. She was identified as promoting high student attainment by her head teacher.

This grade 6 Danish double lesson takes place in the spring term and lasts 90 minutes. Working in depth with a novel (a narrative of love, friendship and power relations evolving around the life at a leper hospital in the Middle Ages in Funen, Denmark) over six weeks in cooperation with her colleague in the parallel sixth grade class, the teacher has already presented the pupils with detailed tasks concerning literary techniques and effects, although she does from time to time require them to take notice of formal linguistic correctness. This lesson involves students working in groups on various extended tasks to which they had already been assigned, all of which they will eventually complete: writing a fictional diary or letter from or to a main character; analysing the dramatic curve of the novel; creating a 'thematic flower', linking the literary content to other areas of learning; constructing and defending a new character or a model of the leper hospital; and writing and acting out a role play. At least one task is to be written individually. After a brief summing up of the status of the lesson by the teacher, the pupils work in groups, independently of her. The teacher circulates to facilitate their work. She mostly asks specific and detailed questions related to challenge students to think further about the thematic content and the way it is expressed in the novel and in their own writing.

In one example, the teacher consults a group of boys:

What's the first thing to strike most people when they enter the leper hospital? [Pupil]: The smell. [Teacher]: The smell, yes. It's a really good idea to describe how she perceives the smells and sounds, isn't it? [Pupil]: Yes. [Teacher]: But this has become much better now, because I can see that you have moved into her head much more than before. What you had written before was more like descriptions of how it looked. I can see that you have changed it towards sensations.

Later, helping a group of girls with their thematic flower she says:

You could also write down on the flower, where you have found documentation about friendship and about leprosy in the text ... These two are actually identical, can you see that? [Pupils] Yes.

Then she asks:

If there's love, who is it between? Is it a romantic love, someone falling in love? [Pupils] No. [Teacher]: Perhaps between Peter and Ellen. [Pupils]: Between Peter and his father. [Teacher]: Yes, there's a strong love between them. Are there other forms of love? [Pupils]: Between mistress and Peter. [Teacher]: Yes... If you could find documentation in the text, because love is a broad notion ... The fact that Peter leaves the life of the healthy for his father's sake, what could you say about that? [Pupils]: it's faithfulness.

In the last part of the lesson, after having asked the pupils to sum up the rules of being a serious audience, each group presents their work to the rest of the class and the teacher asks detailed questions related to the selection of thematic issues, the modes of presentation and the work process. Pupils are encouraged to give feedback in each instance, too, and did so also ask specific questions of each other. A girl presenting her thematic flower is asked:

Which theme do you consider the most important in the novel? [Pupil]: I think that it's about power. [Teacher]: Why? [Pupil]: It is sort of divided into who has a lot of power and who hasn't. [Teacher]: Does that make a difference as to who gets leprosy? [Pupil]: No, but some get their own house while the others must live together. [Teacher]: Yes, so it was a characteristic of that time that there were big differences between people, and they were visible. [Pupil]: Yes.

Finally, at the end of the lesson she asks some factual questions about the nature of leprosy. A parallel to AIDS is suggested by a pupil, and prejudices against diseases are discussed, thereby highlighting wider insights into the human condition.

After the lesson the teacher discussed her aims for her pupils' work on this novel, she explains, understanding texts is essential in Danish including, being 'able to analyse how an author uses the language to express himself' along with grammar and punctuation. But the most important thing is that it includes formative experiences to support pupils' personal development or *Bildung* through working with books and themes which the children can relate to. For example:

to think about issues like diseases – in this period it's leprosy – the prejudices which exist, the way people can think and put other people into boxes, and then relate it to ... the present situation ... The subject of Danish can show that the novels writing about the past or written in the past, what sort of view of life and society is being expressed. And this contributes to giving these children a sensibility to the fact that we are where we are in the present, because we have been where we were.

The teacher adds that the class also works with what is known about leprosy in the subject of science, and it is important to know whether the treatment of lepers was a way of isolating a group of people out of ignorance, so you can ask parallel questions about today.

With regard to assessment the teacher suggested pupils know that they are supposed to deliver products for their portfolio which will later be selected for discussion in the parent-child-teacher consultations. In these:

it is the pupil who reports what he or she can or cannot do instead of the teacher preparing half a page and explaining this is OK, this you have to do better, this you must work with.

Thoughts on this lesson

The lesson described above is, again, representative of much of the other Danish language and literature lessons seen (Dorf et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2013b). The work of the teacher is primarily orientated towards helping students relate to characters and events in the narrative in ways which will contribute towards their personal formation, called *Bildung*. Hence her focus is on linking literature to her students' lives, helping them better understand themselves and the world in which they live through how others have understood these.

The teacher combines a focus on subject development and personal development with a view towards students' democratic citizenship. Language and literature provide a landscape of meanings, ideas and understandings to explore and a way of exploring or knowing these through discussion, contention, opinion and argument, which link to critical citizenship. These explorations are aided by extended lessons and group work in mixed attainment classes.

Throughout the lesson the teacher mostly remains calm, sometimes instructing students and often supporting them through questions, prompts and suggestions, and thereby knowledgeably facilitating students who, by and large, accept responsibility for their own learning.

Links to wider debates

The social perspective we adopt in our comparative work sees the way students learn as being significant to what they learn. In mathematics, for example, Boaler (2002) has found that when teachers focus on curriculum delivery, successful students tend to position themselves as receivers of knowledge primarily concerned with doing things the 'right way', following classic approaches to solving problems and seeking a 'true' interpretation of ideas. However, when teachers encourage more exploratory and discursive engagement with the subject, successful students are more likely to act as co-constructors with the freedom to explore, be innovative and seek alternative interpretations. So when students learn in ways which emphasise either utility and exam success or personal development towards critical citizenship, then this underpins their developing subject understanding. And if we accept Wenger's (1998: 267) suggestion that, 'school learning is just learning school', then the orientation of student learning in language and literature lessons towards either performance or personal formation differs as much between English and Danish schools as the content of such lessons.

However, some hold that students whose parents or carers' work is largely unskilled and manual come to school disposed towards learning things which are practical, useful and linked to their everyday experiences rather than abstract and esoteric ideas (Hatcher, 2012). Further, such students can resist the uncertainty engendered by problem-centred approaches to teaching (Apple, 1982), and are often disadvantaged by discursive and democratic practices (Schutz, 2010). So whilst pedagogy focused on discussion, contestation and opinion may actively encourage learner engagement, it may also be less successful in doing so with poorer students.

The influence of national discourses is clearly identifiable in the two teaching episodes described here. Assessment is, of course, a significant influence on teaching and is central in determining which students are successful; for Au (2008), the higher the stakes, the greater the influence. This is clearly the case in England where standardised student assessments are closely linked to teacher accountability, but remains less so in Denmark. In this, England has followed a different path from Denmark and continues to do so. It remains to be seen for how long this will continue; whether England will step back from its current policy or Denmark step towards something similar. In either case there is much they can learn from each other.

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