A Draft for a Raft of Reflection

Critical discourse analysis from a pragmatic point of view as a method to understand teachers' reflections on aesthetics

Introduction

In school we are supposed to learn. What we are supposed to learn is decided by the society in which the school is situated. What we in fact learn is not decided by anyone. Education is not a simple matter of providing the right stimuli to achieve the intended learning. Homo sapiens is too complicated for anyone to be able to foresee with any certainty what the outcome of an educational situation might be. Despite this we have teachers whose job it is to make sure that pupils learn what the society wants.

Communication is the keystone in any individual or communal development and it is only through interaction with others we are able to define ourselves as the person we are; To be someone means to be someone in relation to someone else. The meaning of things and events are being developed in close relationship with the people around us – in two ways: How would we know what purpose a handshake or a tie has, if we had not been a part of a culture where these things has a certain meaning? And how do these things work as symbols with which we interact with others? We are born into a certain time, a certain space, class and culture with quite specific rules as to what being human is, what is valuable and how power is distributed. While this might sound deterministic, it is not as bad as it sounds since individuals have choices within the system since the system is being constantly recreated by the subjects inhabiting it. It is in other words not a system which can be described once and for all with rules set in stone, but rather the opposite; a fluid system where rules constantly are created, reformed, questioned, recreated or dropped. To be able to float and navigate this fluid reality, there is a need for tools. It would be a good thing with a steady boat, a map and a compass in this case.

A decent social network could suffice as boat, providing a fairly safe raft on which to explore the world. Language provides a fairly decent draft for trying to orient amongst different opinions, written and unwritten rules, strategies, habits, customs and power-relations. Ideology provides the compass which helps us decide where to go. These are not failproof tools by any means. A social network only supports you as long as you stay within their borders – and follow their rules. If your task on board is to scrub the raft's deck, the raft will be a very unsafe place if you try to act like the captain all of a sudden. However there probably is a way within the raft's system for someone who scrubs decks to reach the powers of a captain, but it might not be very easy to see, and it may very well prove dangerous to try. Fortunately you have access to the draft: Language will help you understand where you are, who you are and where to go. The problem with the language-draft is that it consists of symbols that are hard to define, and that may mean slightly different things to different people. But it is the only map available, and everyone else has to approach it with the same uncertainty as whether or not they understand it correctly. Within a society there is an agreement regarding the meaning of a symbol, but still it will always be interpreted differently by different persons because of their background. Someone who has experienced a shipwreck will interpret a symbol for reef different than someone whose only reef experience is great fishing, and the actions taken as a response to the symbol may therefore differ radically.

So even if the goal is obvious because our ideology gives us a clear position, it is still difficult to navigate or to even float in this fluid we experience as reality. So how do teachers approach this
seemingly impossible task of teaching someone else something when we all understand thing differently? This is where the purpose of this paper is set: To investigate how critical discourse analysis in the spirit of Fairclough (1995), can be combined with an ontology inspired by pragmatism, to analyze teachers’ reflections over aesthetics.

**Aesthetics as Focus for Reflection**

In the Swedish curricula for the compulsory secondary school (Utbildningsdep. 2001a), the word aesthetics plays an important part. The word aesthetics is being used not only in the general curriculum for all compulsory schools in Sweden, but also in 13 out of 22 subjects' syllabuses (Utbildningsdep. 2001b). The syllabuses for the Swedish compulsory schools cover all the 22 subjects taught in the schools. The syllabuses for Art, Crafts, Home and Consumer Studies, Mathematics, Music, Physical Education and Health, Science Studies¹, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Religion, Technology² and Social Studies all use the word aesthetic. The rest, Civics, English, Geography, History, Modern Languages, Mother Tongue, Sign Language for the Hearing, Swedish as Second Language and Swedish do not use the word aesthetics. The subjects using the word are not only those that are referred to as practical-aesthetic subjects in everyday language. Actually both English and Swedish, which to a large extent are concerned with what is generally considered art, poetry and prose, do not use the word, while less obvious subjects like chemistry, physics, biology and maths use the word. Having a Norwegian background myself, I found this to be a surprisingly extensive use of the word, especially since these documents are quite thin. Based on this curiosity I investigated how the word aesthetics was being used in these documents and found that there were a wide diversity of different uses of the word (Thorgersen & Alerby, 2005). The question that became urgent to me then was: How do teachers relate to this word? I decided to investigate this further and went out looking for some suitable tools.

**Pragmatism and Critical Discourse Analysis**

Pragmatism and Critical discourse analysis are not the most common couple in the halls of educational research. I do however think that a combination of these two perspectives may provide me with a way of understanding teachers' reflections, that would otherwise be impossible. Not that this combination is the only fruitful one, but, as I hope to show, it is fruitful, and to me the most interesting.

**Pragmatism**

Pragmatism has never been a clearly defined and unified group of people. This makes it important to clarify who in particular forms the theoretical base for a project. In this paper Dewey in particular, but also his friend Mead as well as to some extent the contemporary neopragmatic thinker Shusterman will help me. In the background I have outlined how I see the formation of knowledge, how the world is seen and what truth is. This is neither a relativistic, nor an absolutist ontological and epistomological view, but rather what might be called a pragmatical point of view. Yes, I understand that total understanding of another person's intentions with a sent message is impossible, but I refuse to let that insight mislead me to the conclusion that all human interaction is misunderstandings. Yes, I understand that individuals are bound by the formal and informal rules where they live, but I refuse to make the conclusion that we are all slaves of our class and that the individual is nothing but a socially determined product of society with no autonomy. On the

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¹ The syllabus covering Biology, Chemistry and Physics which have their own syllabuses as well
² Technology only uses the word in the Swedish version since the English translation has omitted the section “Evaluation, Criteria for Grades”
contrary I think individuals together create society. All this is consistent with a pragmatical way of looking at life and it is not compatible with ontologies more commonly associated with discourse analysis such as social constructivism (Burr, 1995) and poststructuralism (Jørgensen & Philips, 1998) because these are, at least in their pure form, relativistic and deterministic: There is no real truth, and people do not exist as individuals, but rather as some part of a collective force (Hake, 2004; Burr, 1995).

Today Pragmatism is no longer alone when it comes to balance; Bourdieu represents this in between point of view, and so do life world phenomenologists like van Manen (1997). So why am I drawn to pragmatism when it would may be be more convenient to stick to Bourdieu or life world phenomenology? There are three reasons: First of all I am attracted by the fact that Dewey has been so influential in the reform-pedagogical movement that has been steering the pedagogical debate since the 1930s. “Learning by doing” or even “learning by deweying” where hammered into our heads when I went to teachers trainers college. However we never read any of his original work even if it is quite accessible, and the introduction to his thoughts were rudimentary at best. Dewey’s influence is quite interesting since as far as philosophical influence goes, pragmatism’s influence was almost completely overrun by analytical philosophy in the 20th century (Shusterman, 2000). Secondly I am attracted by what I perceive as staying young. What Dewey and Mead wrote during the first 30 years of the previous century still looks fresh to me – especially the ontological and epistemological parts of it. Finally, I am attracted by the “no crap” attitude I interpret in the texts. von Wright (2000) calls “but how does it become then?”, the pragmatic question of truth, indicating that just analysing and deconstructing a phenomenon is not enough for it to be interesting. You also have to speculate on what the consequences of your thoughts could be. As a part of this, pragmatists have not been afraid to be normative. As an example Dewey uses much space in his texts arguing for his view that democracy is a precondition for a decent life (e.g. Dewey 1916). And it is in this issue of normativity and willingness to speculate on change and alternatives, I see a clear connection to critical discourse analysis (CDA).

**Critical Discourse Analysis on a Bed of Pragmatism**

During the relatively short life of discourse analysis, it has managed to split into several branches with different strengths and weaknesses (Jørgensen & Philips, 1995). From the seventies and up until today discourse analysis has developed to be a diverted field of clearly different approaches to research and within different fields of research, but still with some common denominators. Discourse analysis is concerned with use of language and how meaning is created in communication, the power relations these words represent and what kind of different meanings and opinions on how the world is at present Discourse theory is generally considered a social constructivist method (Hansen, Ryrberg & Torfing, 2001, Laclau, 2001), but in my opinion it is possible to apply CDA on an ontology inspired by pragmatism. As I wrote earlier, pragmatists do not deny that there is an “objective” world out there, but our access to it and understanding of it will always be based on our linguistic interpretations of our sensory inputs, and therefore there is no objective truth to be found – only the representations that creates our understandings of reality (Daly, 2002). I will not in this paper go to lengths describing other varieties of discourse analysis than CDA, and according to Fairclough, he believes that “[...]the social world is indeed a socially (and in part discoursally) constructed world, but at any point in time people are confronted with a pre-structured world which has real properties and a real structure which cannot be reduced to, and are not unconditionally subject to, people’s knowledge of it, beliefs about it or projects for changing it.”(Fairclough, 2005)

To see things in their right context is in fact one of the important characteristics of CDA. Since
meaning is created in a social context in relation to other things, other people and other phenomena, it is important to take these into consideration when doing the discourse analysis. In my study this means that when someone says that “the pupils think aesthetical subjects are so much fun”, I will have to see that in the proper context: Where is it said, what kind of social group does the school recruit the pupils from, what kind of leadership do they have, are there any conflicting discourses which fights for power, what are the general political, educational and other relevant tendencies in society? A problem in this respect is balance. One of Dewey’s key issues is balance (in particular Dewey, 1910), and the CDA I will be using will be strongly influenced by that. In this case balance is all about drawing a relevant line for where surrounding information gives useful input, and to choose this input wisely. Since Fairclough states that “[...] any level of organization may be relevant to critical and ideological analysis” (Fairclough, 1995, p.7), everything could be, and probably is, relevant if the aim is to find the ultimate truth about a text. To take everything into an analysis means ultimately to draw a map of the world in its present and historical states to enlighten the question in focus, a task fitting for God and not a PhD student in education.

This paper is a part of an ongoing project where I attempt to investigate how teachers reflect upon aesthetics. To get access to this I have performed a group interview as well as individual interviews, with six teachers representing six different subjects in which in the syllabus uses the word aesthetics in the assessment criteria. The teachers were situated on three different schools in the north of Sweden. According to CDA it is important to see the discourse from several different angels using different texts. The question then is how much empirical data I should collect besides the interviews to get a grip of how this text relates to other texts. In this case I am not so much looking for the social impacts on the reflection as what kinds of reflections that take place in these interview sessions. Why then do I not choose a more descriptive discourse analysis than CDA, one might ask. Basically because I believe in the importance of seeing discourses as a part of social practice, and thereby staying alert in my analysis process. This means that even if I do not actually collect press writings about the school, or observe the teachers practice, read governmental documents or look at the political climate in the community, I still have a possibility to speculate on these issues because of my background and my presence in the same kind of social field as these teachers operate in. I have been working as a teacher for several years in secondary school like these do, and I have regular contact with pupils and teachers who live their daily lives in similar schools. I am therefore in a privileged situation because of my familiarity with the field, but at the same time this could be a major problem if I am not critical towards my own knowledge, prejudice, experience and involvement in the field. As Bourdieu states very clearly in Homo Academicus (1996) when he analysed his own field, the university world in France, it is important to be as critical towards your own theorisation as towards your empirical data. CDA therefore provides me with tools to be able to analyse without just writing down my own preunderstanding.

This leads me over to another attractive point of CDA, namely denaturalisation. The point of denaturalisation is to discover what is taken for granted by those in the field for thereby to be able to criticise it. This could be a problem for me because of my involvement with the field since the fish is the last one to discover the water it is swimming in, but through going through everything that is being said in the interviews and really looking for doxas\(^3\), I think I have just as good a chance as anyone to discover them. For example in my study it is interesting that the subject that is definitely most frequently mentioned is maths despite the fact that maths was not amongst the subjects they where asked to represent\(^4\). This could mean that much of what goes on in these schools are actually being done on the premises of maths, or at least it shows that maths is very up front in their

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\(^3\) Bourdieu's term for something that's taken for granted.

\(^4\) Chemistry, Music, Religion, Physical education, Physics and crafts were picked because of their use of aesthetics as assessment criteria.
consciousness in their rhetoric about school. This could maybe indicate something about power relations between subjects in the schools. A more specific example is that after having talked for quite a long time about aesthetics in school, and all they talk about is aesthetics as alternative ways for the children to express themselves. When I finally ask them about how they think about pupils experiencing aesthetic expressions made by others, the room is filled with silence. When they eventually starts talking about this aspect of aesthetics, they use quite some time to define the subject before they eventually reflect upon this what seems a comfortable way. This could be interpreted as an indication that when these teachers talk or think about aesthetics in connection to school, they are only concerned with a part of what might be defined as aesthetics, namely pupils practical or artistic work as opposed to more theoretical and traditional school work. If I then apply the pragmatic question of truth upon these reflections, I might end up with some interesting results. If maths rule the school's rhetoric, how does it become then? Will the assessment in other subjects as well be subject to the same demands on logic, abstract thinking and theorisation as maths? Being aware that this is only speculation, it raises some questions which could be important to follow up on to denaturalise and therefore open up the discourse for change.

I have already mentioned that power plays an important part in CDA. As a part of understanding the social interaction that constitutes the framework in which the discourses analysed is constructed, it is important to uncover the power relations on a macro as well as on a micro level. Fairclough talks about hegemony, a concept which stems from the old Greek word for cox – the person in charge for steering the boat. In a broader sense it has to do with political leadership, but within discourse theory it refers more to the processes which constitutes the power relations. A basic assumption in CDA is an almost neomarxist belief that the ideals of the ruling class, or to talk in terms of Bourdieu, the ones possessing the symbolic capital, is reproduced by everyone on society. This is again closely connected to the denaturalisation of fish’s water.

Whether such a view on power is useful is to a large extent dependent on whether you believe in the neomarxist presupposition or not. Fairclough himself says that it is important to balance the view on reproduction, especially when it comes to ideology. Even though his view is that power is reproduced, he stresses that “there is a danger of over-emphasizing reproduction” (Fairclough, 1995 p. 18) and points to several examples of Marxist theories that has done exactly that because they have believed in a deterministic reproduction. In its modern form with no clearly defined class possessing the capital, but a rather more complicated system of structures constantly moving, but where power still is reproduced to a certain extent, I have no problems with such a belief. Nonetheless it is important to be aware that the results in a CDA analysis is done on the basis of such an assumption so that if you do not believe in this yourself you may have problems with the whole result of the study. In my material power relations are very difficult to uncover because of the nature of the questions asked. However I have seen a few examples. One is that the examples of teaching methods that they define as aesthetic are often explained as being good because pupils learn better. But what they learn are often theoretical knowledge, not aesthetic. Aesthetics in classrooms are subject to the power of the theoretical knowledge where aesthetics plays the role of motivator or recreation.

Fairclough sums up the essence of CDA in what he calls a three dimensional framework consisting of the actual text, the discourse practice and the sociocultural practice. To be able to understand the text, denaturalise the ideologies, power relations, discursive practices and so forth, not just the actual text, but all three dimensions must be taken into account. Historically there has been a struggle between those claiming that the text is autonomous once it has left the author, and those who claim that the text is nothing if the context in which it was created is analysed as well (Shusterman, 2000). CDA is in the latter category, while the pragmatism I define myself as part of
takes an in between position. In all practical use this actually means that pragmatism and CDA is compatible. Pragmatism sees text as being constantly (re)produced by the society it operates in. If the text stops being a part of the discursive practice, it also stops to exist as text. However as long as a work of Shakespeare or a work by Beethoven continues to play a part in society, they will also be constantly reinterpreted, be used in new situations by new people with different backgrounds being part of new social constellations. The text might consist of the same letters, but is no longer the same text because it is read with new eyes, new associations in a new context (Thorgersen, 2005). This does not mean that Beethoven or Shakespeare and their time is irrelevant for the interpretation of the text. On the contrary, it is a vital part of the current story of the text, and therefore also the text, and different perspectives of the creation of a text could lead to another change in the text because this would change how people read it. CDA is not being used in historical studies as far as I know, but the following argument still holds true I think. If we accept that texts are constantly (re)created, we have to analyse the creation of the text in the frozen moment of time where the research sets in. This of course also means that the historical roots of the text is a part of the current creation of the text, but to analyse a text as if we took a time-machine back into the 17th century and forgot all about today, is impossible. So even though on the surface pragmatisms view on communication and text may differ from that of CDA, they are still compatible in practical usage.

So what then does this three dimensional framework mean? I think it is useful to see it as a memo to ensure that the research takes into account the necessary factors in order to be able to get as complete picture of the issue at hand as possible. The point of the first part, text, is to look for patterns in the actual text, sentences, choice of words, metaphors and so forth, that may show hints of ideology, power, discursive struggle and other relevant factors of an analysis. In my study this is where the main focus is.

The second dimension is called analysis of discourse practice which involves how texts are produced, consumed and distributed. In other words how the discourse actually is constructed and spread within the field and in relation to other fields to talk with Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1995). In my study the best example of this is when one of the participants spontaneously during a coffee break in the interview says “we never talk about aesthetics”. And the others agree. There seemed to be no active, conscious production, distribution or consumption of texts that constructs discourse on aesthetics. When I followed this up in the analysis as well as in the individual interviews, the picture gradually became more crisp: The teachers all agreed on everything and confirmed each others opinions. It seemed that they had no interests to protect, and despite their obvious involvement in the discussion, they gave no indications that there where any different sides in the discourse, or that there even was a discourse. When I followed this up in the individual interviews this was confirmed. But while investigating this I also came across a paradox. How come there is no discursive struggle, when they all seem to agree in their reflections that aesthetics both in schools and for people in general is really important? They all stress that meeting each pupil as individuals and to offer them different opportunities when it comes to expressing themselves. And when they gave examples of this, they imitated what I perceive as conservative middle aged male teachers who they obviously identified as representing the opponents in a discourse: “Now everyone should do this, and then everyone should do this”. There are in other words struggles on different parts of the aesthetics field, but there seems to be no real hegemony on the whole field.

The third dimension of CDA is “analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (Fairclough, 1995 p. 2) where the interpretation of the text is incorporated into social practice. The most obvious example of this from my study is when we talk about the syllabuses, and

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5 Despite that in principle all research is historical research since research is always analysis of something that has taken place.
the participants show by expressing surprise at what it says and being very unsure of how to
to interpret the text, that this text have not yet, at least not on a micro level, been a part of sociocultural
practice. The question then is which texts do have the hegemony?

These three dimensions are not exclusive and must be looked upon as inseparable parts of a
whole. Fairclough says that they must be analysed both on a macro as well as on a micro level where
no dimension can be analysed without taking into account the two other levels.

Ending on a self reflecting critical note...

This text started out being fluid, easy to read and stashed with metaphors. I really wanted to
communicate what I had to say in a way that not only triggered your intellectual curiosity, but also
made you feel the meaning by activating your associations and thereby involving more of the reader.
As I wrote it is in both pragmatism as well as CDA's interest to change social practice, and to
change practice communication is essential. And as long as I wrote about pragmatism and my
ontological and epistemological base, it was fairly easy to play with language and break with some
of the inherent positivism that scientific writing often is infected with. Interestingly the more I
wrote about CDA, the more I stumbled linguistically. This could be because of my lack of
understanding of the theories, but it could also be something else. Fairclough's texts are not very
accessible to non academics, despite the fact that he stresses that CDA could be a basis for
sociocultural change. So why doesn't he aim to communicate? To speculate on the basis of my own
little writing I am tempted to say that it because of the nature of CDA. Trying to unclouk the hidden
secrets of a social practice is no easy matter, and CDA reflects this. And now I come to the point
where pragmatism and CDA is incompatible, namely when it comes to what I choose to call
atomism. Pragmatism was the loosing party in the ballgame between analytical philosophy and
pragmatism. Analytical philosophy worked by pulling a phenomenon apart piece by piece to finally
pull it together again claiming that it was the same phenomenon. Pragmatists never bought that way
of understanding the world. They would rather look at the consequences of how something appeared
or worked, and what implications that may have. The sums of the parts are not the same as the
whole. The whole consists of the parts, but without the whole the parts are no longer parts, but self
contained wholes. CDA also has the holistic perspective, stressing that every factor should be seen
in relation to all others, but the methods outlined are still atomistic in their nature. That does not
mean that they are bad, but that a modified CDA based on pragmatism would suit me better, and
might make the next text I write on this issue more accessible. This modified version of CDA would
look at the complete text for patterns or regularities or irregularities, but without looking
specifically for the reproduction and power-relations, but rather use the aspects of CDA as
reminders so that I do not act as a microphone stand to the agents on the field. It is important to be
critical, but if all focus is on finding the structures that constitutes the power-play, I am afraid that a
lot of other aspects are lost in the process. What I am trying to say is that this combination of CDA
and pragmatism seems very fruitful in that it keeps the critical and atomistic elements in the picture,
but always in a holistic perspective.

To meet the teachers as persons and to get access to their individual reflections is the aim of
study. I believe that these persons who live on board the raft to be aware and awake and able to
reflect upon their own raft, and thereby create a draft of aesthetics in schools. The challenge for me
then is to see a bigger whole where persons are autonomous only to a certain extent and where
social systems and language games sets the premises for what is possible. However I do not believe
that I need to do this alone. If I enter their raft as a humble guest, as well as invite them over to mine
for tea, we might be able to prepare a better draft for both rafts through common reflection.
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