How to analyze a school subject and its power to manage changeability

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The aim of this paper is to introduce a methodological approach to the analysis of school subjects. School subjects are complex entities, and it is not a simple question how to go about exploring them. A key consideration concerns the rapidly changing conditions of education in the knowledge economies of late modernity: how do these conditions form the understanding, concept and analysis of school subjects.

One frame of reference for the presentation is the question of quality in educational research. I hope to contribute to the conference project by presenting a concrete research project and the inherent theoretical and methodological considerations and decisions. Another frame of reference is my field of research, disciplinary didactics\(^1\), which in Scandinavia is a fairly young field of research and not especially well established as to definitions and institutionalization.

The overall project of this paper is to contribute to the development of disciplinary didactics as a field of research.

The research project presented is a ph.d. study of the upper secondary school subject ‘Danish’ (Krogh 2003, 2006). In Danish students are taught Danish language and literature; the dominating activities are text analysis and writing. The school subject has existed since around 1800, but its most glorious period started in 1906 when a school reform made Danish a key Bildung agent, responsible for transferring ‘Danishness’ as a national, cultural identity to students attending upper secondary school. This process was to take place through the students meeting with the Danish language in its noblest forms as found in the greatest works of Danish literature. Only a very small percentage of students attended the upper secondary school at the

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\(^1\) Fagdidaktik in Danish. Even though the English word ‘didactics’ has pejorative connotations, I have chosen to stick to the most direct translation of the Danish (Norwegian, German) name of the field. It is difficult to see any better option, so I suggest that we try to establish a continental interpretation of the term in the community of educational science.
time, and the Bildung concept was related to the fact that these students were to fill positions as loyal civil servants. The nation building ideal was unchallenged until the 1960ies when the number of students attending upper and higher education exploded. Since then conflicting discourses of Danish have been fighting for hegemony. A communicative and democratic ideal has been established in the subject, seeing students’ language activities as media for democratic Bildung processes. Also new existential and aesthetic Bildung ideas have been developed in connection with literature studies. Ideas of splitting the subject have been vented at times, and it is being discussed how to justify the focus on Danish literature in a more and more ethnically mixed culture. What is obvious is that the traditional nation building concept has lost its legitimacy. Even though a national cannon of authors has recently become mandatory in the Danish curriculum, this must be interpreted as a compensatory act by liberal-conservative politicians who want to keep up the national tradition and conservative values.

In spite of the climate of dispute and conflicting discourses, however, Danish seems to have survived more or less untouched. Reforms haven’t split up the subject or removed vital contents and activities. Although media texts have entered the subject, and language has gained more weight in the curricula, literature has not lost its position as the dominating content profile, and the general balance between literature and language seems to have been preserved. Objectives, activities and subject contents apparently still seem to make sense to students and teachers.

This observation was the point of departure of the study of Danish. My research question was whether the kind of knowledge production taking place in Danish is relevant in modernity and productive in young people’s processes of competence and Bildung.

The question demands theoretical and methodological reflection. How can a school subject be studied considering its complex, fluent and historical nature. What theoretical position and analytical strategy will allow for the necessary combination of scientific rigour and openness for cross disciplinary approaches.

My overall theoretical and methodological approach is disciplinary didactic. This demands further development as disciplinary didactics is not an established theoretical frame of reference. According to Norwegian didactician, Bjørg Gundem, however, disciplinary didactics
is a growing field of research. In her keynote lecture at the first Nordic conference on disciplinary didactics in May this year\(^2\) she made the observation that since the 1980ies disciplinary didactics has gained ground as compared to general didactics, mainly because disciplinary didactic theory is the most concrete level of didactics as it is both related to subject science and to concrete teaching practice. Disciplinary didactics therefore is placed in the fields of tension between theory and practice and between the scientific discipline and the school discipline.

Following Gundem’s analysis disciplinary didactics should be distinguished both from the discipline of ‘general pedagogy’ and from the understanding of teaching as direct transmission of scientific knowledge. Another important point is that there is no hierarchy but a more open relation between pedagogy and science and between theory and practice. Gundem’s observations are developed further in the following definition by another Norwegian researcher, Laila Aase:

Disciplinary didactics is all the reflections connected with a subject and the teaching of this subject, which gives added knowledge about the nature of the subject, of its justification and added knowledge about how to learn, teach and develop the subject. (Lorentzen et al.1998: 7).

Reflection is a key term in this definition, highlighting that disciplinary didactics is not a formalized discipline, but a more open research approach. To reflect is to mirror an object, involving both a conscious decision of positioning oneself as a researcher, of choice of perspective and analytical strategy, and of letting one’s approach to the object influence by the nature of the object. So disciplinary didactics is conscious of the research position and sensitive to the object.

According to Danish educational philosopher Lars Henrik Schmidt (1999) this feature makes disciplinary didactics – and the whole field of pedagogics - a modern science as compared to

traditional science. Modern science, he says, is distinguished by its interest in research and practice rather than in theory building.

When Bjørg Gundem speaks of fields of tension one might ask what keeps these fields together. Current disciplinary didactic theory points to linguistics for an answer. In the last decades of the 20th century what may be called a linguistic turn appeared in the didactics of the specific subjects. A common focus on language practice was evident (Lorentzen et al 1998: 140). Later studies have confirmed this observation (cp. Krogh 2003, Ongstad 2006, Knain 2007, Vollmer 2007). A comprehensive theory has been developed by Sigmund Ongstad (2004, 2006). He sees the growing interest in disciplinary didactics in the context of contemporary economic and cultural currents. Formalized knowledge is under pressure in a knowledge economy demanding global competitiveness and adaptability. Subjects and disciplines are forced to discuss and justify themselves. According to Ongstad the growth in disciplinary didactic research and development can be seen as a reaction to changing conditions and contexts. At the same time disciplinary didactics has a strategic responsibility to preserve and continue specific knowledge in a changing society. Ongstad therefore sees disciplinary didactics as a field of research reaching further than the educational system. He understands disciplinary didactics as a processual and contextualized scientific approach, as can be seized by the term didactization. Disciplinary didactics covers processes of communication and reflection on subjects and fields of knowledge, not the subjects as such.

This means that didactization becomes a discursive, semiotic or textual process, weaving a subject or a field of knowledge closer together with the metaknowledge about the subject knowledge in new contexts under pressure from a changing society. (Ongstad 2006: 35f.)

There is currently a pressure for didactizing school subjects. There is a demand to justify and legitimize subject knowledge, to make explicit tacit criteria and standards, to relate subject knowledge to new contexts and respond productively to changing conditions. Fast changes

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characterize contemporary culture and society, and subjects must be able to give adequate answers to changes inside their field of knowledge for teaching and learning in the subject to become productive and relevant for students. In disciplinary didactic practice and research learning and teaching seems inseparably connected with change and development. This analysis leads me to specifying a disciplinary didactic concept of learning. I find it productive to distinguish between ‘learning’ as the general pedagogic concept and knowledge production as the specific form of learning taking place when subjects are taught. ‘Knowledge production’ as a concept of learning links disciplinary didactics with research and inquiry and learning in school subjects with an operative Bildung perspective. More concretely the concept relates learning in school subjects to didactization.

My study of Danish as a school subject was conceived as a disciplinary didactic project, referring to the understanding of disciplinary didactics presented above. I wanted to explore the potentials for knowledge production in Danish. However, I needed relevant analytical concepts and a more precise analysis of the relation between subject science and didactics in the school subject.

As to the question of relevant analytical concepts both the ‘linguistic turn’ and the understanding of disciplinary didactics as a modern epistemological science call for linguistic approaches addressing language as communication and as a resource for meaning making. Discourse theory was an obvious choice for a general approach, but I also drew on social semiotic genre theory in order to widen the concept of language. Communication and meaning making imply other modalities than language, and studying teaching and learning in subjects demands the wider understanding provided by social semiotics and modern genre theory. In choosing discourse theory as the general theory, however, I stress that I understand disciplinary didactic production of knowledge as learning which is primarily regulated in language. More precisely, the various forms of representation in disciplinary didactic knowledge production are almost always also regulated in language.

As to the analysis of the relation between subject science and didactics in the school subject I found the notion of transdisciplinarity fruitful. Fairclough and Chouliaraki (1999) develop this
concept in relation to discourse analysis. They present discourse analysis as a transdisciplinary and recontextualizing theoretical practice:

Working across disciplines can be understood in a superficial way as an ‘interdisciplinarity’ which consists in applying the theoretical categories and methods of different disciplines to the same issue or problem in a way which leaves them untouched. It can be understood on the other hand as ‘transdisciplinary research’ [… ] in which the boundaries between disciplines and their categories are put at risk. (Fairclough and Chouliaraki 1999: 112)

They see a transdisciplinary relationship between certain sociological theories and discourse analysis. This relationship involves a process of translation when the categories of one theory are put to work within another (op.cit: 112f). When categories from one theory are ‘internalized’ in another they are ‘grounded’ in the sense that they are partially motivated and formed within the logic of the other theory as well as within the logic of their own theory (ibid.). Transdisciplinarity between theories depends on these being ‘exotropic’, i.e. open to dialogue with other theories (Hasan 1999). A theory is exotropic if it defines its object of research within a ‘problematic’ that it shares with other theories. For instance critical discourse analysis is exotropic in that it defines its field of research (discursive aspects of contemporary social change) within a problematic shared with other theories, namely the dialectic between social systems and social action in contemporary societies (Fairclough and Chouliaraki 1999: 113). Critical discourse analysis is seen ”not as a single theoretical practice but rather as a recontextualising principle that draws together other theoretical practices under a dialectical logic.” (Fairclough & Chouliaraki 1999: 113f).

The concept of transdisciplinarity is highly relevant in an understanding of disciplinary didactics as a theoretical practice. Like critical discourse disciplinary didactics can be understood as a workshop for transdisciplinary processes and as a recontextualizing principle that draws together subject and didactic theories under a dialectical logic. At another level transdisciplinarity can be established between discourse theory and disciplinary didactics because their research objects are defined within the same problematic, the production of knowledge and meaning. Whereas discourse theory deals with language as certain ways of speaking about and understanding the world, disciplinary didactics deals with subjects and the teaching and learning of subjects as specific ways of producing knowledge.
A keyword for transdisciplinary processes is practice or ‘doing’. Recontextualization is described in the metaphor ‘putting to work’ by Fairclough and Chouliaraki. The point is that a theory or a concept is internalized in another theory without being reduced to this. When subject theory and didactic theory are put to work in the disciplinary didactic project, they are transformed by the concrete analytical or teaching practice, but not in the sense that subject theory turns into didactics or the other way round. When, for instance, a fairy tale is analyzed in a Danish lesson, a new genre develops because the didactic embedment changes the social function of the fairy tale. Also text analysis as a scientific method is influenced when it is embedded in didactic deliberations of progression in learning, utility value in other subjects et cetera. Vice versa, subject theory influences the didactic practice when the dominating practice of text interpretation in Danish leads to an understanding of learning processes as processes of meaning making.

The transdisciplinary understanding undermines more traditional concepts of disciplinary didactics. In this perspective didactics can’t be separated as an auxiliary discipline providing techniques for presenting any scientific knowledge. Correspondingly subject knowledge can’t be understood as entities that can be transported untouched through different didactic contexts.

Ruqiaya Hasan who coined the notion of ‘exotropic’ theories, points out that because these reach into so many different domains, they are threatened with chaos (Hasan 1999: 14). If a theory is to avoid confusion, at least two conditions must be met. First, for the theory to contain the potential for chaos, its languages of description need to be well developed; and secondly, because it connects with phenomena of different kinds, its conceptual syntax must not only be able to distinguish among the different kinds of phenomena it invokes, but it must also be able to specify the relations between them. When these conditions are met, the theory can engage in meta-dialogue.

My methodological ambition in the research study of Danish was to develop a language of description and a conceptual syntax which met these demands. The aim was to contribute to the development of disciplinary didactics as an exotropic theory able to engage in meta-dialogue with the different theories that contextualize and influence school subjects.
The methodological challenge, however, was not solely to design a generic approach to the study of school subjects. As conditions of change is an essential aspect of disciplinary didactics and as my research interest was in Danish as a subject responding to fundamental changes, my research design had to be sensitive to both the general complexity of school subjects and their powers to manage changeability.

I developed three analytical concepts: form of knowledge, genre and discourse, designed to study school subjects as respectively theoretical, cultural and rhetorical practice.

There is no hierarchical relation between the three forms of practice; they are mutually related and can be conceived as aspects of a communicative triad. Researching as well as practising school subjects are processes of didactization, and as argued above, these are discursive, semiotic or textual processes (Ongstad 2006). The triadic model can be compared with the didactic triangle in its simplicity and in the nature of the relations between aspects. All three forms of practice will be inherent in any uttering on subjects, even though one of them may be dominant. When a specific analytical interest puts one form of practice in focus, the other dimensions will be visible, but formed by the dominant perspective.
The three forms of practice relate to different fields of knowledge, and they also represent different conditions of change.

Seen as a theoretical practice the school subject relates to the sciences contributing to the subject. In school subjects specific sciences are recontextualized and brought to enter transdisciplinary relations with each other and with the didactic ideas and aims of the education in question. The theoretical practice is a relatively stable dimension, and the rate of change is fairly slow. My research shows that Danish has been constituted by some balance of Danish literature and language (writing) for more than 200 years, and even though media products and practices have entered the subject during the latest 30 years, these have generally been assimilated as text studies and text practices.

The theoretical practice is conceptualized as a form of knowledge. Form of knowledge refers to a specific way of producing knowledge. The concept is developed with reference to Michel Foucault's notion of discourse as knowledge regimes (Foucault 1969/1972). The Danish philosopher Lars Henrik Schmidt, in line with Foucault, sees form of knowledge as a ritualized disciplinary practice referring to a specific field of knowledge (Schmidt 1999 I: 37f.). Form of knowledge, then, refers to the inner rules regulating what can be said and done in the specific subject, and what is accepted as subject activity. As a form of knowledge the subject can be seen as a discourse formation (Foucault 1969/1972).

Foucault developed two analytical strategies in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), an archeological and a genealogical strategy. The archeological strategy aims at bringing to light the accept rules that regulate statements on Danish. To locate a relevant set of statements for analysis I chose the curriculum at force (1999) which had recently been slightly adjusted, but had otherwise been in force for more than 10 years. The adjustments mostly consisted in formulating goals and objectives of the subject which had until then not been explicit. I found that this curriculum housed updated, regulating statements on Danish. Statements bring four categories of phenomena to existence: domains of objects, possible subject positions, conceptual networks and strategic contexts. The archeological analysis brought to light a puzzle picture of Danish. The subject was constructed as two parallel images and Bildung concepts which were invisible for each other. One image was dominated by receptive practices of literature studies and an aesthetic Bildung ideal, the other was dominated
by productive practices of language use and a democratic Bildung ideal. In the programmatic paragraphs the language image appeared to dominate, but curricular regulations of content demanding substantial time spent on historical literature seem to undermine this impression. The genealogical analysis takes its point of departure in the archaeological findings and aims at deconstructing the traditional history of continuity of the discourse formation, cutting the traditional history into pieces and trying to find other patterns in these. For this analysis I constructed an archive of historical and current curricula and programmatic articles on Danish. In pursuing the historical traditions of the puzzle picture I cut up the history of Danish as the century old national Bildung subject and found another, more or less forgotten rhetorical tradition dating back to around 1800. This tradition was revived around 1970 and transformed into a new focus on students’ language and especially on writing. In a parallel movement the national Bildung ideal connected to the national literature was replaced by a new, aesthetic Bildung ideal. In the curriculum of 1999 these two images and Bildung ideals seemed to fight for hegemony. Perceived as a form of knowledge the fight for hegemony seemed to be between interpretation as a receptive hermeneutic practice and meaning making as a productive language practice. So the form of knowledge of Danish combined practices of interpretation and practices of language production, but the relation between these appeared fuzzily defined. Very shortly my conclusions as to the form of knowledge of Danish were that the puzzle picture state of Danish might well be interpreted as tragic, but the situation might also be interpreted differently. The puzzle picture might indicate that Danish as a form of knowledge is on the move, and that there is an openness for change and a potential for development.

Seen as a cultural practice the school subject relates to cultural currents influencing students and teachers and classroom cultures. The rate of change of this dimension is faster than is the case for the theoretical practice, even though classroom practice has its strong traditions. The analytical concept brought to bear on the cultural practice, is a broad, semiotic concept of genre developed by Sigmund Ongstad (1997). The classroom genres are the social conventions through which the form of knowledge is implemented. The genre concept reaches beyond the focus on language and seizes on the multimodal communication in classrooms. Studying the
cultural practice is studying the communicative pattern of didactic classroom genres which makes the subject recognizable for students.

Studying the didactic genres of Danish as a cultural practice invites ethnographic and data collection approaches such as observation and interview, students’ products and teaching documents. Due to the size and complexity of my research project, however, I had to refrain from empirical studies. Instead I did a comparative analysis of two recent research and development reports on writing in Danish which, according to other studies of Danish, could be seen as representative of current didactic positions.

The analysis of the cultural practice in the two reports confirmed the puzzle picture of the theoretical practice, showing two didactic genre patterns in which students’ writing was positioned quite differently. In the first project writing was integrated with literature studies. The basic idea was the didactic project of ‘balancing voice and genre’. Students were to learn to position themselves in text interpretation as well as in text writing. In a general perspective students’ positioning themselves in relation to school genres was seen as the model of learning in Danish and as the core of the Bildung project. In the second project writing was taught as a competence. The project was to teach the students to write better texts, and several new didactic genres were developed, such as new types of tasks and a map of evaluation criteria. The context of the teaching of writing was seen not as the subject, but as the exam.

The first project pointed at potentials for transgressing the puzzle picture as the didactic genre pattern integrated language and literature practices and established a notion of Bildung that connected aesthetic and democratic ideals in the idea of cultural participation and production. This observation, it can be argued, documents that the cultural practice has a more rapid rate of change than the theoretical practice. At any rate the analysis of the two reports raise interesting questions for future empirical studies as well as general disciplinary didactic analyses.

Seen as a rhetorical practice the school subject relates to the level of educational and curricular policies. This is realized as the rhetoric of the subject in the professional discourse community of its teachers and, connected to this, in the direct political negotiations of curriculum changes. This is the most rapidly changing aspect of subjects. As a matter of fact there was a major reform of the Danish upper secondary education as late as in 2005.
The analytical concept brought to bear on the rhetorical practice in my study was discourse, referring to Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992). In this approach discourse is language understood as social practice, i.e. as socially and historically situated action, in dialogue with other facets of the social. To Fairclough discourse is connected with concrete institutions and can be analyzed as texts. Seen as a rhetorical practice Danish was analyzed as an order of discourse in which contending discourses on the subject fought for the power to define the subject and influence curricular reforms. I concentrated on the debate about the subject in the journal published by the organization of teachers in Danish. I found two contending discourses. The first tended to blame current didactic problems on students and politicians. The other discourse accepted these as didactic challenges and, over the period of 5 years that I analyzed, this discourse seemed to be winning.

My analysis of the three aspects of Danish indicate that the subject is out of balance and perhaps falling apart, but then again perhaps on the move, keeping up a necessary openness to unavoidable changes. In a conclusive, more visionary and philosophical chapter in my thesis I develop a further analysis of the potentials of Danish, related to the special construction of literature and language practices. I argue that Danish has exceptional potentials for contributing to a modern humanistic educational Bildung project connected to combined processes of interpretation and meaning production. This would make Danish a vital contributor to modern students’ educational projects of competence and Bildung.

The theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of Danish offered in this presentation can, I assume, be brought to bear on any school subject and also on cross disciplinary studies. It should be perceived as didactization and as such as a contribution to disciplinary didactics as a modern field of research. Methodologically the strength of my approach is that it insists on the comprehensive picture while at the same time being sensitive to studies of the different dimensions of school subjects. School subjects are very complex entities, and any methodological model is bound to reflect this complexity. Still, the basic communicative triad also has the beauty of simplicity.

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4 Fairclough’s ‘order of discourse’ is connected to a concrete institution whereas Foucault’s concept ‘discourse formation’ refers to a wider complex of knowledge which may be extensive both as to space and time.
References


