

Crossing borders

Perspectives on learning in a school musical project

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ABSTRACT

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This article focuses on in what ways learning arose and developed in a school musical project, what it was like, and how one can understand this activity in an educational context? The school musical project was put on in collaboration with the ninth form of a lower secondary school and the municipality's leisure-time centre. The study was based on observations, interviews and focused group discussions. The participants' social and artistic interactions, together with the common artefacts, joint commitment, and influences from both school and leisure activity had a major impact on the creation of a cross border-learning environment. Status and hierarchies among the pupils were renegotiated due to the impact of that new learning environment. The lower secondary school curriculum describes measurable knowledge in separate subjects, providing clear contents and strong classification as legitimate knowledge. The project had an optional nature, as it involved no marks, but was rather based on subject integration with a zone of unpredictability. Hence a dilemma occurred. The voluntary, interdisciplinary nature of the project, partly in contrast to a curriculum dominated by compulsory individual school subjects, could support an educational alternative that can challenge traditional model of teaching.

Keywords: school musical, learning, interaction, collaboration

Introduction

This article is about musical theatre in a school context. It is a popular activity and every year a considerable amount of school musicals are produced in Sweden and around the world, with committed children and young people performing in front of a large audience.

The musical is a form of modern musical theatre and the Swedish concept of 'musikal' is an abbreviation of *musical comedy*, *musical play* and *musical film*. These genres arose in the U.S.A. and England in the first half of the 20th century and the Anglophone umbrella concept for the genre is *musical theatre*. Yet the word *musical* is associated more with the work than with the phenomenon (Gammond 1991, Kenrick 2008).

A musical may consist of many different components. According to Gammond (1991) the current concept of musical is used in a wide sense, although the precondition for using the concept in modern theatre is that a number of songs are presented on stage, as part of the production. What the modern musical contains, besides song and music in a stage context, is not given. It is influenced by a popular culture landscape that is constantly changing, with today's rapid technological development enabling new ways of presenting a story. The genre is accordingly flexible and allows great freedom in scenic expression.

The musical production in my study was conducted throughout the school year and those responsible for the project were Fanny, Frank, Maria and Lennart. Fanny and Frank are teachers at a leisure-time centre, Maria is a music teacher in a lower secondary school and Lennart is a retired preschool teacher with previous experience in the producing of school musicals.

The performance was staged in a theatre outside the school and the musical depicts the struggle between good and evil in a story about youth gangs, relations and the importance of daring to follow one's dreams. At the centre of the musical's plot there is a man who has inherited superpowers from his father. Imaginative and inspired by science fiction and comic books, the story takes place both on Earth and in space.

The school musical script is inspired by the comic book world of the 1940s and 1950s and offers a romanticised image of the family, related to the values held at that time. The father works, the mother is a housewife and the children, a boy and a girl, are well behaved. The mother and the two children have minor roles in the story, while the focus is on the father, an "ordinary man" who has inherited supernatural powers. Other leading characters are a male gang leader and a female dance instructor.

The pupils had chosen to work on the musical as a specialisation mark-free, one-year option *Elevens val* ["The pupil's choice"], which forms part of the national

curriculum. The target group adapted the manuscript, which had already been written and the teachers, in collaboration with the pupils, chose the music with new lyrics being written to accompany existing rock songs.

My overall aim was to study how, and in what form, knowledge developed in an interdisciplinary educational activity, like a school musical project and what role this activity has in a teaching context. The aim is connected to the following research questions:

1. In what ways does learning arise and develop and what is the learning like?
2. How can one understand a school musical project in an educational context?

Theoretical points of departure

Recontextualisation; the making of a school musical

In order to understand musical theatre in a school setting, I am inspired by Basil Bernstein's (1971, 1996) theoretical framework. He argues that when knowledge and competence existing in society is transferred to a school context, a *recontextualisation* can take place and pedagogic discourse can be created. Pedagogic discourse may then constitute the basis of creating a school subject or an educational activity. He calls this process a *pedagogic device*.

According to Bernstein, three kinds of rules govern this process: The *recontextualising rules* governing the process and creation of pedagogic discourse. The *distributive rules* that determine who can say what to whom and under what circumstances and the *evaluative rules* creating the practice, based on this discourse.

Musical production, as a school activity, can through this process be created, through formation of a pedagogic practise in an artistic context. This practise has a relation to the curriculum, musical theatre as genre, popular culture and the surrounding society.

Vygotsky (Lindqvist 1999, Strandberg 2006) asserts that creative activities like music, text and image creation have the psychological function of uniting imagination and reality within an imaginative creation and this can give rise to something new and real. It is possible to imagine a similar function for creative activities in collaboration. The new real phenomenon may then be a stage performance, such as a school musical.

Educational knowledge code

Bernstein uses the concepts *classification* and *framing* to analyse underlying structures in curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation and assessment. These are products of an

educational knowledge code. The curriculum defines legitimate knowledge, the pedagogy what is the legitimate transfer of knowledge and evaluation, and assessment, which is regarded as the legitimate realisation of the taught knowledge.

Classification is related to the degree of boundary establishment between subjects. If the classification is strong, there are clear boundaries and hence a high degree of isolation among the different subjects. In contrast, if it is weak the isolation and the boundaries are less tangible.

Framing refers to the degree of control over what is transferred and accepted in a pedagogical context. Strong framing leads to fewer opportunities for teacher and/or pupil control of the subject content and the way it is taught, while weak framing implies greater opportunities to influence it.

Bernstein distinguishes between school subjects as *singulars* or *regions* where singulars are specialised, discrete discourses while regions are constructed by recontextualising singulars into larger units. He stresses that a regionalisation of knowledge can threaten an educational structure and culture dominated by singulars.

Border crossings

Goodman (1968, 1978) contends that, in addition to own values, individual aesthetic expressions have qualities reaching beyond their medium and that for this reason music can e.g. influence how human beings look upon the world and images can influence what human beings hear. He further stresses that creative interaction among different stage expressions, for which scope is provided in e.g. the modern musical, with its non predetermined form language, may create a new world.

Dewey (1934/1980) mentions an *aesthetic quality* that is created through an artistic process, referring to knowledge where play, work, art, craftsmanship, thought and feeling are interwoven. He argues that the artistic process is not only granted to the artist but exists in every individual. In this process pupils learn to look at the world in different ways, in the sense of both experiencing and understanding with artistic attentiveness.

This relates to Robinson (2009) who identifies a condition where natural talent meets personal passion. He calls this "the Element". It is here that human beings feel most satisfied with themselves, most inspired and able to achieve at the highest possible level. Robinson emphasizes the lust for learning and stresses the importance of putting pupils in an environment where they want to learn and can discover their true passions.

Vygotsky (1978, 1987), as well as Dewey (1934/1980), stresses that educational activities should be reality based and applicable on the real world. They argue that learning should extend to out of school environments and activities. Learning situations

should thereby relate to this extension, characterized in my study of e.g. the theatre and activities at the municipality's leisure-time centre.

Sociocultural learning

According to Vygotsky (1978, 1987) learning is a social mediated process and a collaborative activity. He stresses that human beings have a zone for possible development and this he calls a *zone of proximal development*. Here, in collaboration with other people and by means of mediating tools, human beings can become creative and hence develop and realise their dreams. By means of maturity and experience we can grow and move forward, but we cannot reach our full potential without communicating with other people. Through questions and problematizing and by listening to other people's ideas and thoughts, we can discover something that was previously hidden from us. This can be done in interaction with others, e.g. in pedagogical activities with dialogue as the basis. The zone of proximal development may serve as a guide in curricular and lesson planning.

When a teacher, or more competent peer, as a part of this process, give necessary help to a pupil in his or her zone of proximal development and withdraw this aid as it becomes unnecessary, the behaviour often is called *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976). Scaffolding as teaching method can increase the pupil's self-confidence, when he or she copes with a task and eventually can perform anything previously considered too difficult to implement.

The idea of scaffolding is inspired by the work of Vygotsky and the concept is associated with a scaffold removed from a building during construction. The metaphorical building in my study is the performance and the scaffold can be removed during the production of this performance.

Former research

Törnquist (2000, 2006) studied how learning was staged in a school musical production. She argues that what the participants conceive as important components of the learning environment were; the working methods and forms of working, the social interaction, the emotional commitment, being allowed to work in a creative process through creating, acquiring new knowledge and skills and understanding others and thereby oneself.

The picture presented of the teacher is as an artistic pedagogue, who is able to shift among the different roles as participant, supervisor, leader and artist in the educational work.

Collings (1999) identifies a school musical project as a laborious complex activity, with a pragmatic dimension that contains a great love for the stage, where the participants and the audience have a close relationship.

Method

The school musical project in my study was conducted throughout the school year. 55 pupils participated, of which 25 appeared on stage. During that year I observed the activities once a week during the last three months, with exception of the three final weeks, when I observed the activities on a daily basis. I interviewed the teachers and had focused group-discussions with eight of the participating pupils. I regularly conducted observation notes and my interviews were transcribed. The empirical data was analysed with a hermeneutic approach, where interpretation and understanding were essential and new insights led to a new levels of understanding.

My choice of research methods was inspired by Lofland & Lofland (1984), who stresses that looking, listening, watching and asking are interwoven in the observation, and part of this listening and asking can approach, or be the same, as intensive interviewing. As guideline for the observation I used an observation schedule, related to my research questions, with these main dimensions suggested by Spradley (1980); *space, actor, activity, object, act, event, time, goal and feeling*.

Agar (1980) argues that qualitative researchers should engage in participant observation via an introductory general overview with a broad focus on more specific aspects of the situation. My point of departure was to gain an overall idea of what was going on and then be able to see the different patterns and the significant parts of the project work and hence also be mindful of the unexpected and surprising that may shed new light on the event.

According to Wolcott (1985) three different types of participant observers may be discerned. These are; *the active participant* who has a different job to perform in the investigated area, *the privileged observer* who is known and can be trusted and *the limited observer* who develops confidence in the role of researcher over time.

In my study I identified myself as a part of the second category, the privileged observer, because the teachers were already familiar with my interest in musical theatre in educational settings and sympathized with the educational science purpose I had with my study.

To be known and trusted made it easier for me to create a confidential relationship and conversation with the teachers and pupils involved in the project.

The selection of pupils for the group-discussions was made so that representatives of all the spheres of activities of the project were included. My study was based on the *pupil perspective, teacher perspective* and my *observation perspective*.

Except for the teachers, the informants were schoolboys and schoolgirls and my ethical considerations were based on rules and regulations in accordance with www.codex.vr.se. Consistent with these rules and regulations, parents have approved in writing, the students' participation in the research study and pupils, teachers, school and leisure-time centre have been anonymised in my text.

Results

Interdisciplinary learning

Through a working manuscript the project leaders present an interactive working and exercise material at the start of the semester. One could say that the manuscript is the project's shared teaching aid, with scope for proficiency training, problem solving and pupil influence. This open teaching aid, with weak framing, seems to inspire aesthetic, but also practical and craftsmanship processes, in an artistic context.

In addition to the stage items *music, drama, song* and *dance*, the craftsmanship element is tangible, since the pupils work with *sound* and *lighting design, stage construction, properties, stage design, stage clothes design* and *documentation*. This implies an opportunity for the increased teaching of woodworking and metalwork, textile handicraft and art, but also for the teaching of elements in dance and drama, subjects that are not available on the ordinary school timetable.

Apart from these subjects pupils identify, as part of the project, speech and text interpretation, related to the languages Swedish and English. They further mention dance as movement related to physical education, because of the energy and movements involved.

The project leaders emphasise the pupils' interest in participating in the musical project as an important precondition for learning. They stress the advantage of the existence of the willingness to learn something. Lennart refers to a television program he has seen, when he describes the pupils' interest as an important factor in a learning process:

It must be interesting. There must be elements that interest. I remember a television program on education I've seen. There was a boy in grade three who could not read. He was very interested in space. By astronauts and rockets.

The teacher encouraged him to find out as much as possible about this and this helped him a lot in his learning to read process (Lennart).

One can identify similar processes in the school musical project. E.g. when a pupil trains his or her reading ability, by reading the script. This may happen because the interest and desire to participate in a musical performance, benefits the willingness to practise reading and thereby the learning process.

Proofs of interest and a willingness to learn seems to be present when the project participants come to the theatre premises during their breaks and rehearse theatre lines and musical difficulties, as well as when they choose to take part on their spare time, in stage construction or paint the stage wings. These proofs also seem to appear, when pupils use the leisure-time centre's premises for voluntary rehearsals in the evenings.

The participants mention that what they learn in their work on the school musical cannot be learned in ordinary schoolwork and that this is due to the lack of individual marks, the stage character, the pleasurable aspects of the work, and the aim of showing the result to an audience. The pupils emphasize a collective knowledge they want to be proud of together:

- *Here we know what to learn. It is the learning method that makes a difference (Anna).*
- *It's fun and we have to pull ourselves together. There are 120 people (at the opening performance) who will come and look at what we can do. We feel that we'll have to manage this (Ben).*
- *When we are sitting in the café (the place for most of the ensemble scenes), we are all together (Cleo)*

Fanny, one of the two teachers at the leisure-time centre, believes the pupils learn in collaboration and that they develop both on and beside the stage. She stresses the importance of "learning for life".

At the leisure-time centre she often comes into contact with young people dreaming of becoming famous as performers. That dream is also alive among the participants in the project who, in the course of the work, often refer in different ways to current popular performers or participants in talent contests. There is a relationship to elements in a surrounding popular culture. A relation explained by Fanny as follows:

This is also something of an Idol and Fame thing. They dream about being able to appear on stage later on. Several youths who started out here have also continued in music and theatre (Fanny).

However, the reasons for taking part in the project may differ among the participants. It may involve anything from peer pressure and being excused from dull school teaching, to the opportunity to train for the stage and/or a future upper secondary school programme. This implies varying levels of ambition among the pupils.

Since teachers of dance and drama are not always employed by lower secondary schools, this subject competence is sometimes lacking in school-musical work. Instead of employing drama and dance teachers on a temporary basis, committed teachers and pupils, with knowledge in these subjects, help one another to teach and instruct.

This is the case here, when committed teachers and pupils learn from each other and other participants learn from them and a non-hierarchical learning takes place. This interaction seems to create a learning space for both pupils and teachers, built on joint commitment and artefacts and becomes of importance for the identity of the teaching.

Self-confidence

During the work, I observe Maria, together with single pupils, practicing singing and stage expressions. When I ask her about the essence of the activity, Maria stresses that one of her most important tasks as a music teacher, is to help the pupils to venture and thereby help them to gain better self-confidence. She is especially protective of pupils who have the knowledge, but not the self-confidence.

Maria argues that the school musical project offers an opportunity to grow and develop through music, theatre and dance and to become more secure. She exemplifies by telling about one of her former pupils:

Two years ago there was a girl who had such terrible stage fright. We started the performance week with her walking about and humming and me singing. And the first time she was by herself she lost herself and went in bursting into a flood of tears, and then she started peppering herself up and managed it at the end of the week. And her happiness after that... (Maria)

With pupils in a zone of proximal development, Maria can by providing the appropriate assistance (scaffolding), give them enough of a boost to achieve the task and they may gradually develop the ability to perform on their own and thereby increase their self-confidence.

Before retiring Lennart was involved in annual musical projects and during a large part of his professional life he worked with children and youth. He emphasises the importance of being part of a community, of having a value as a young person and of being good enough as one is. Lennart says:

The most important aspect of the project is that everybody is allowed to take part and to be something. This is especially important for youths who are not very interested in education (Lennart).

The prerequisite for taking part in the project is that the rest of the schoolwork is done in a good way. The pupils, who are not very interested in school, consequently run the risk of not being allowed to take part in the project, which might further strengthen a feeling of being excluded and it can affect their self-confidence in a negative way.

Between school and leisure

The production of a school musical, an interdisciplinary educational activity in an artistic context, has weak classification and framing. When this educational activity, as a discursive procedure, is to fit into a curriculum prioritizing measurable knowledge, related to individual school subjects with a clear subject identity (strong classification) and a clear content given in advance (strong framing), a dilemma arises. A consequence of this dilemma is a distinction between the musical project and other schoolwork. The pupils accordingly distinguish between the school and the musical project and are aware they have to work more by taking part:

- *There are lots of things we must manage to finish. The teachers try to give us assignments at other times (Anna).*
- *It's like home assignments and such things (Ben).*
- *We know this in advance. When the musical starts we'll have to work more (Cleo).*
- *It was planned like (David).*
- *For several years they have known it would come. The whole of lower secondary school (Eric).*

The project leaders also distinguish between schoolwork and the project work, whereby schoolwork seems to have higher status. The music teacher Maria feels that her colleagues are supportive and understanding when adapting their teaching and not placing tests and home assignments during the project's final phase. Her reaction implies an activity outside the ordinary education, to some extent dependent on other teachers' attitudes and benevolence.

The cooperation with the leisure-time centre creates a zone for learning, between school and leisure. Here pupils can move out of roles they are used to play at school, which may imply why participants stress they can act freer and more unconstrained.

Conclusion

As regards *how learning arise and develop and what this learning is like*, my interpretation is that learning arise and develop in an artistic and social process, consisting of shared artefacts and joint commitment. Learning takes place in the interaction between teachers and pupils, teachers and teachers and pupils and pupils. It is learning developed in a shared meeting. The process is characterized by both play and work, where music, drama, dance, art, craftsmanship and influences from other subjects are interwoven. Learning can be linked to school subjects and collaboration between them, as well as working methods and forms of expression, related to school-subjects. The participants state that use of their different talents towards a collective manifestation, together with their inclination and interest, are important components of the learning environment. This perception is linked to a flexible non-hierarchical learning environment, based on themes and subject areas, rather than separate school subjects. In this environment pupils' talents in different areas can be utilized. Since pedagogical discourse creates a practice where the goal is to perform a school musical and the way in which to enable this stage production, the content of the teaching is thereby relevant for both the process and the product. This requires both artistic and practical contents and both the aesthetic and practical knowledge are hence of importance.

Regarding the question *how it is possible to understand a school musical project in an educational context* modern musical theatre has a close relation to and is hence influenced by a popular cultural landscape in constant change. As a consequence recontextualisation to a school context seems to be faster and more unstable than for traditional school subjects. Based on pedagogic discourse an interdisciplinary practise between school and leisure is created. Pupils can increase their self-confidence and social roles and hierarchies renegotiate in a cross-border learning environment, based on a national curriculum. A curriculum intended for both the compulsory school and the voluntary leisure-time centre. The learning environment is characterized by a high degree of freedom of choice, with a nature of both teaching and leisure activities, no marks and a creative dimension of unpredictability. In a learning zone in-between, pupils can move out of roles they were used to play at school, which may imply why participants stresses they can act freer and more unconstrained. Since the curriculum for lower secondary schools indicates that measurable knowledge of separate school subjects is legitimate knowledge, this implies a dilemma for a theme-oriented project without marks, characterized by freedom of choice, regionalisation of knowledge and a content not given in advance.

Discussion

Robinson stresses that the idea of separate subjects, with nothing in common, offends the principle of dynamism (2009:248). School subjects and stage expressions, in the school musical project have interacting qualities reaching beyond their content. Through dance e.g. the rhythm of music can be embodied and through drama text can be strengthened and dance, music and drama in interaction with each other and other subjects, can deepen an artistic expression and emphasize a message. If the educational knowledge code signals that knowledge of selected individual subjects is legitimate knowledge and focus is placed on measurability and assessment, interdisciplinary thematic work risks not fitting the school criteria.

When the pupils are not marked, as in the school musical project, they are spared the disadvantages of the marks. The mark free environment may be experienced as tolerant, which makes it possible for pupils to make more experiments, search and dare to make mistakes. It is a learning environment and free zone that both pupils and teachers experience as positive. A disadvantage is however that the demonstrated knowledge and the individual achievement are not formally valued as much as in school subjects. A certificate of the knowledge can then e.g. not be used in a competitive situation concerning places in an upper secondary school program, where this very knowledge is wanted. A mark free pedagogical activity, in a school with focus on marks, also risks getting low status.

There is solidarity between teachers and pupils in the development and defence of a creative activity, partly separated from the rest of the school, an activity both groups regard as positive. This autonomy also makes it less problematic to have a partly project-funded entrance fee for stage performances in a lower secondary school that is expected to be free of cost. This nature of independence may indicate that pupils perceive the activity as more “for real” and less as an assignment among other school assignments.

In recent years a market adjustment of schools has taken place (Liedman 2011, Ravitch 2010). They have become exposed to competition and schools use different ways of interesting pupils in their own activities. Offering participation in a school musical is one of various competitive tools for attracting youths to a certain school. A school musical may be a scenic show window for the school’s pedagogical activities. The degree to which it is a part of these activities may vary however, as well as the function and status given in the educational context. A lower secondary school may have a pedagogical and creative goal to integrate subject activities, openness to different kinds of project work and new technology and with a not too clear focus on measuring and assessing. In such an environment interdisciplinary pedagogical activities should

be able to find their place in the curriculum. If such a goal and openness are lacking, these kinds of activities risks being excluded. The voluntary cross-border nature of the project, partly in contrast to an educational culture and structure dominated by individual school-subjects, can in addition to support a pedagogical alternative also challenge that culture and structure.

Attention is today paid to the utility aspect of education, with emphasis on usefulness of the knowledge on a labour market. From this perspective the usefulness of teaching different aesthetic subjects is sometimes questioned. The teaching in a creative interdisciplinary project, such as e.g. a school-musical project, is however likely to prepare for a working life where among other things work in boundary-crossing projects and dynamic groups is common and the ability to cooperate and deliver a result on time is rewarded. The result on time in the school musical project is a stage show, with a fixed day for an opening performance.

A great obstacle to a meaningful teaching situation and knowledge development at school is when pupils do not understand the meaning of their work and when a concrete goal for the learning environment is missing. This is not the case here.

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