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Visual meetings in the classroom

Art didactic constructions of knowledge and positions in upper secondary school

Abstract

Due to developments in visual technology, teachers and students are exposed to an increasing number of images in their everyday life, which also finds its way into the classroom. This study aims to contribute to further understanding of how knowledge and positions are constructed in visual meetings in the classroom by problematizing the discursive practice of visual art education in upper secondary school.

The study investigates how art teachers construct positions when talking about their choices of images for teaching and what kind of knowledge thereby is constructed as valuable. The study also analyzes how art teachers and students construct positions in visual meetings in the classroom and what kind of knowledge thereby is constructed as valuable.

Data production is carried out through ethnography, which involves interviews with two art teachers and observations of eleven lessons in visual art classes at two upper secondary schools.

The study is theoretically framed by theories and concepts in visual culture and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The concept visual meetings refers to how art teachers and students interact and make meaning when using images that the art teachers have chosen. The perspective of discourse analysis involves that classroom interactions are seen as expressions of knowledge and power in general and of prevailing views on visual art education in particular.

The results show that a dominating overall school discourse regulates how the art teachers and students are constructed as active/adult/experienced and passive/child/unexperienced subjects.

Extended summary

Introduction

Initially, the reasons for why I wanted to carry out this research project were based on my own teaching experience as a visual art teacher. I perceived how both teachers and students often chose and used images without reflecting on what those choices and uses produced in terms of visual forms of knowledge and identity construction. I reflected on how images seemed to play vital roles in what was expressed or not, who was allowed to speak or not, and in what ways teachers and students were allowed to express themselves or not. Therefore, I wanted to carry out research within the field of visual art didactics and problematize interactions among teachers, students and images in classroom practice.

In this research project I regard images as a part of teachers' and students' social and meaning-making practices in the classroom. Teachers and students choose, interpret, produce and reproduce images together as parts of visual art education. Images of primary focus in this research project are those that visual art teachers choose and use for didactic purposes. Images are defined as all kinds of analogue and digital visual materials such as photographs, films, visual art, artifacts, drawings, sculptures and animations. Furthermore, the school as an institution is seen as a discursive practice that focuses on students developing knowledge in different subjects. In addition, knowledge is defined in perspectives of discourse, which means that knowledge is seen as constantly constructed in the social and meaning-making practices of the classroom.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to contribute to further understanding of how knowledge and positions are constructed in visual meetings in the classroom by problematizing the discursive practice of visual art education in upper secondary school. The focus is on examining and analyzing art teachers' choices of images and interactions in the classroom that involve the art teachers, students and the chosen images.

The first two research questions deal with how art teachers construct positions when talking about their choices of images for teaching and what kind of knowledge thereby is constructed as valuable. The second two research questions deal with how art teachers and students construct positions in visual meetings in the classroom and what kind of knowledge thereby is constructed as valuable.

Theoretical background

When defining, analyzing and problematizing the phenomenon visual meetings in the classroom I combine theoretical perspectives that draw on visual culture and discourse analysis related to texts by Michel Foucault.

Visual culture can, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, be defined in terms of looking practices, which involve negotiations about what images and seeing mean in different contexts. They argue that visual culture can be understood as a flow of interactive processes and practices, in which meanings and experiences are produced (Sturken & Cartwright,

2018). They claim that visual culture is produced through negotiations within the practices of cultures. According to Sturken, visual culture can be understood as being produced among people, artifacts, images, technologies and environments.

Further perspectives on looking practices are raised by Hal Foster, who writes about how the physical ability vision differs from visuality (Foster & Foundation, 1988). He argues how the concept visuality can deal with “how we see, how we are able, allowed and made to see”. Sturken adds that visuality implies how the visual is embedded in power relations, involving structures of the visual field and ideas related to images (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018).

Michel Foucault also discusses how power and knowledge relations are produced and reproduced in social and cultural practices (Michel Foucault, 1988, 1993, 2010, 2011, 2017). Based on Foucault’s writings, I regard discourse analysis as a tool for questioning the obvious, and not straight off accepting the validity of practices. In this research project, I regard what happens in the visual meetings in the classroom as a discursive practice in which there are both knowledge and power relations that are expressed through actions of various kinds, such as the choice of images, statements, looks and gestures.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, I regard the visual meeting in the classroom as an everyday situation in which teachers and students engage in social practices involving looking practices. It is like a flow of interaction involving images as an essential part, which affects what is expressed, how it is expressed and what is not expressed. It is in constant flux, which means it continuously develops and is produced among teachers, students, images, technologies and environments. The images that the teachers choose, based on didactic purposes, for teaching are a vital part of the classroom’s looking practices and permeate the interaction between teachers and students. When using images together, teachers and students produce different ways of understanding the world. A key term in the visual meeting is the constantly ongoing negotiations that take place when teachers and students look at, interpret, produce and reproduce images.

Methods

I chose an ethnographic study, in which interviews and classroom observations are primary methods for producing material. The idea of combining interviews and observations was to produce a rich material that included both the teachers’ and my own reflections about image choices and interactions. Through interviews, I studied the teachers’ views on image choices and classroom interactions. In the classroom, I studied interactions among art teachers, students and images.

The ethnographic field studies were carried out during the school year 2017-2018. Participants in the study are two visual art teachers with each a class at two different upper-secondary schools in Sweden.

Findings and results

One of the classroom practices is shown to prioritize position and knowledge constructions related to production of aesthetically pleasing images. The other classroom practice is shown to prioritize position and knowledge constructions related to image interpretation in terms of understanding cultures and contexts. Both classroom practices also show that despite the art teachers’ stated intentions in constructing independent and critically examining positions for

the students, looking practices are formed in the classrooms that do not allow such positions for the students to any great extent.

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