

about teachers and teaching and learning environments

CAN YOU DANCE YOUR NAME?

I remember during my time at the Kaospilots school, I was taught by John Visser, a Dutch trainer in improvisation and theatre sport. When running through the agenda of the last day of the course, he told us that at the end of the day, we were going to dance our names. "That's it", I thought, "This is too awkward." Although, I could relate the exercise to what I had learned during the week: The various ways of handling the environment in theatre sport and improvisation, embracing the now, following what happens, creating flow, supporting people around you in what they are doing, "making your partner look good" etc., but nevertheless...

Exciting as the other days of the week, the day was soon coming to an end, and before I knew it, we were at the point of the agenda where I absolutely did not want to be. We were standing in a circle, and now it was my turn. I was to say my name slowly, taste every letter in it, and then make a movement I felt was fitting. Everyone else joined in behind me, imitating sound and movement, so finally we formed one long line of sound and movement.

To put it mildly, I was shocked with myself afterwards. What just happened there? Why was I participating, and why was it fun and educational rather than weird? No doubt this was due to the teacher. But what exactly had he done, not just to me, but to all us students?

I have thought a lot about this incident since then, and my explanation for what got me from deep scepticism (almost anxiety) to engaged participation is really quite simple:

**confident-building environment + relevance
= openness and curiousness**

A confident-building environment

There is no doubt that he deliberately placed this exercise at the end of the day on the last day of the week. At this point I was completely used to the playful and curious setting and to laughing together rather than at each other.

The exercise was not individual. I was to start, but the whole group followed me and copied me. This way I was accompanied in what I did, which made it legitimate and fun. And then all the weirdness was gone - or at least not relevant in the context.

+ relevance

As I understood the purpose of the exercise back then, it was about identity. Part of a professional, authentic context is to be yourself and not pretend to be anything else. The point was that your identity is closely linked to your name.

I must admit that afterwards, it has helped me to be aware of who I am, who I want to be, and who I don't want to be.

= openness and curiousness

John Visser was capable of creating a confidence-inspiring setting and a community where it meant more to discover and try things out than how I was perceived by others. It wasn't about being flawless, but about exploring.

I wasn't prompted to put myself on display. We were in it together, and this was no doubt because of the teacher (and absolutely in the spirit of improvisation). That is why I dared. Especially because the teacher led the way. He showed us how to do it, and was constantly aware that if we were insecure about how to get started (luckily I wasn't the only one who felt weird about it), he took care of it, stepped in and led the way. He brushed up and confirmed the environment and context where it was necessary, without words, but in actions.

The teacher's big impact on students

A lot of good teachers have great influence on their students, an influence that can have its effect even years later. My experience is from 1993. Still, I remember the situation very vividly, perhaps not in every detail, but in its meaning and relevance.

I think it is important to remember, that "just another day on the job" for the teacher can be that crucial moment that makes sense and stimulates the desire to learn for the student. This is something I believe John Visser is very well aware of.

What is in fact a good teacher?

During the development of a course in innovative education, I couldn't help but notice the knowledge, experience and seemingly endless curiosity in relation to the theme of innovation, entrepreneurship and teaching, displayed by the project group. It made me curious; I just had to ask them about their attitudes to and reflections on a

good learning environment. I also asked them to reflect on what elements of the learning environment they believe a good teacher could and should teach him- or herself, and what elements are part of a teacher's personality - one's personal attitudes to didactics and the specific topic that is being taught.

What they have told me is here mixed with my own observations and experiences. This article is a practice-oriented reflection on learning environments. It is to be read as inspiration rather than as instruction in correct teaching. What is described here is what we (the project group and I) think characterises a constructive, "good" way of creating a learning environment.

When did you last experience good teaching?

Have you thought about when you last experienced good teaching? A workshop, a course or maybe just a good presentation, something that gave you the experience of walking away with something more than you had expected?

If you subtract that the theme perhaps really hit your interests, what else happened that made it good? What did the teacher, trainer or presenter do? Where did it take place? How was the room arranged? How were the other participants interacting? What was said and done that you really liked? How much do you think was planned and how much was coincidence? Let's have a look at it: If you wanted to recreate this good learning experience:

- What would you copy 1:1?
- What would you do more of?
- What would you do differently?

A good learning environment

I am sure that some of the things you come up with are not strictly related to intellectual knowledge about a subject, but also to a sense of physical environment, participants, and time.

In other words, it is not that simple to create a good learning environment. By being aware of the factors that play a part in your teaching, it can become significantly easier to deal with.

This is also saying that it is about transferring your knowledge to fit it into your own practice: From the theoretical understanding inside the head to the practical application - out of the head and into the world. Part of being a good teacher is to understand your material - and its relevance - to be able to communicate it to others.

The project

In 2009-2010 the Danish Ministry of Children and Education developed and carried out a pilot project in relation to the "Pioneer Prize", a campaign with focus on strengthening qualifications in innovation, entrepreneurship and developing ideas in both teachers and students.

The project had the purpose of developing a course for teachers that could challenge conventional perceptions of the role as educator and teacher. At the same time, the course was to be practice-oriented, which meant that the participants were taught concrete tools and methods to create a learning environment that encourages creativity, idea development and academic, innovative progression.

It was the hope that each participating teacher would be able to (and would want to) take the new skills back to his or her own educational institution and involve colleagues in further developing and continuing the process. My role was to facilitate the project group whose task it was to develop the course content, and also actively to join in where necessary. The group was a diverse assembly of teachers who had a common feature of being actively involved with innovation in the Danish educational system.

Signs of good teaching

What often repeated itself when I asked the project group about signs of good teaching is that it contains one or more of the following elements:

- Clear purpose
- Meaningful content
- Flexible learning environment
- Shared responsibility for learning

Clear purpose - why am I learning this?

A clear purpose does not only mean a clear agenda. It is just as much about the relevance of what is going on in the teaching: Why am I learning this? How is it useful now and in the future? There are politically decided learning goals and schedules for teaching. And then there are individuals who develop themselves. The first part is - broadly speaking - only directed towards the professional teacher. The other part is an interaction between teacher and student.

It was obvious to the project group that if the teaching doesn't make sense for the student, not much learning will happen. In other words it pays off to spend some time finding a path to where it makes sense.

For Irmelin Funch Jensen, it is a helpful method to activate her students through the frame of her "KIE" model (creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship), which is a pedagogical, didactic tool for innovative learning.

With for example mandatory assignments that are to be written during the year, she asks the whole class to collaborate on developing possible ideas and themes that can be pursued within the given frameworks. This way she activates all resources in her class, and the students help each other discover where each student finds most relevance in what is to be learned.

Meaningful content

How is this useful - also in the future?

The big picture is about basic knowledge and good grades that provide access to more specialised education in the future. This also calls for the student having a good amount of patience and - depending on the level of education - a high level of abstraction.

Some people are good at working with a high level of abstraction, and hereby gain knowledge without necessarily utilising it until much later. But it is the experience of the project group that this is only the case for a small part of students.

This is not to say that the long-term purpose of learning isn't important, it is in fact highly important, so that we develop and progress in education over long durations, and in society as a whole. What can help us along the way however, is teaching that also has a short-term purpose.

How is this useful in the short term?

It is more motivating for each student if what is learned can be directly utilised or directly related to everyday life.

One of the modules in the Pioneer Course was on the topic of networks. Networks on all levels; in a group, an organisation and in interplay with the surrounding world. The two teachers Henrik Ottosen and Dorthe C. Z. Iversen came up with the idea of starting the day by asking the participants for help through their networks: Once, Henrik had a Ferguson tractor at home that refused to start. Where could he find information and help? In only two minutes he was referred to five places, three of which were people he could call and ask for direct help, two of which were referrals to places where he could seek more information.

With that as a jumping off point for the day, it was suddenly much easier to relate knowledge and theory about networks to one's own everyday life, both privately and professionally. This significantly increased the amount of

perspectives on the theme and initiated some fruitful discussions about professional versus private network and if it makes sense to make a distinction at all. Open questions without clear-cut answers provide more perspectives and increase the possibility of meaningful nuances emerging.

Flexible physical learning environment

- room for you and me

What is a flexible learning environment? In these innovative and entrepreneurial times, the first thought is perhaps a creative room where tables and chairs can be moved around, where one can draw on the walls and where there are movable dividing walls and maybe even differently coloured lighting and some mood-setting background music. This is probably not what the everyday environment looks like for most teachers. So what can be done?

Exercise

Ask your students:

1. What is good teaching for you?
What happens when you experience good teaching:
 - a. What does the room look like?
 - b. What kind of materials are used and how?
 - c. How are the lessons divided/arranged?
2. How can I create good teaching for you?
 - a. What do I do (in details, when my teaching is good for you)?
 - b. What will I see you do (in details, when my teaching is good for you)?
3. How can you help in making this happen?

Let the students work in small groups and create a checklist for good teaching, for example under the headline "*This is what good teaching looks like*". Let them create a similar checklist for how they themselves can contribute, for example under the headline "*This is how we help X (you) create good teaching*".

Consider writing up and prioritising the lists for yourself and presenting them for your students. This can be the jumping off point for a good collaborative process about learning that can be adjusted along the way if you or your students find it necessary. .

Note: If you aren't working with the students over a longer period of time, but are doing a short lecture, workshop or the like, as an introduction, you can ask the participants to reflect over the following (by talking with the person sitting next to them):

1. What needs to happen here in the next X minutes/ hours for it to be worthwhile having participated?
2. What will be your contribution in order to make that happen?

The experience of the project group is that even few resources can get you far. A used couch can do a lot, rearranging the tables, maybe a curtain can be put up to act as a dividing wall or to make an otherwise fixed room flexible.

At the beginning of the school year, Ann-Merete Iversen asks her students to arrange and decorate their classroom from scratch. They have the traditional furniture at their disposal and are furthermore encouraged to leave their mark on the room by supplying elements. This way a class of students personalise the room that is to be the frame of their learning in the year to come. It is an amazingly simple and effective method to let them take responsibility for their learning by letting them have influence on their learning environment.

In practice, a flexible physical learning environment also sometimes means rearranging the room for a period of time. Jesper S. Nørskov often lets his pupils furnish an editorial office when the class is doing newspaper projects. This way the room is flexible and with a few changes adapts to what is happening here and now.

Shared responsibility for learning – what can we learn together?

The teacher has the final responsibility in ensuring that the learning goals - that have been decided politically, strategically or personally - are actually met. Therefore it is also the teacher who must make the final decisions about what is to happen in the teaching.

When this frame is set, the focus can shift to the shared responsibility for learning. Involving the students in the teaching strengthens not only the teaching itself, but also a flexible and selforganising learning environment. This increases each student's attention in the teaching, not only in relation to own strengths and competences, but also in relation to strengths and competences of the other students.

Is it possible to have a group of people without a hierarchy forming? Perhaps not, but it is certainly possible to have a group where a professional respect for one another has been built, and where it is of course allowed to chose who to engage with outside the classroom, while it is accepted that in relation to one's learning (teaching, assignments, projects etc.) collaboration happens across gender- and group status.

This is a culture that has to be cultivated both on a technical, logistical level of sharing knowledge, and also by ensuring that students are motivated to utilise each other as resources and inspiration.

This is the case with everything from long-term education to short workshops lasting only a couple of hours. For young classes in elementary school, the children might need guidance to learn the norms and behaviour that can characterise a good learning environment.

These norms need to be nourished in the exploring individuals young children are. For young adolescents and adults, where a certain amount of life experience is present, the question will be to facilitate and supervise so they know what learning environment they are a part of.

Game

It is possible to nourish a networking culture amongst students by using games and collaboration exercises in the teaching.

Example: **"All those who...."**

Students are sitting on chairs in a circle. You place yourself in the middle, and say something about yourself that isn't obvious or visible. It doesn't count to say that you are a man/woman (obvious) or wearing a blue shirt (visible). Rather, it could be "All those who speak French,... have been on a bicycling vacation,...can scuba dive,...like to dance", and so on.

All those who match what you say has to get up and find a new chair to sit on. At the same time, you are trying to take a free seat for yourself. The person who ends up in the middle without a chair continues with a new "All those who...".

Note: the fundamental principle of games is repetition. Therefore this game is great in several different contexts:

- As a start-up of a new group, so students get to know each other
- As a simple energiser
- Where you as the teacher give a theme and encourage the students to further develop it, for example "If this game is about technical terms within X, how can we then play it?"

Effect: students become aware of resources and diversity within the group.

As a teacher, you gain insights in the lives of the participants and about their knowledge of certain topics.

By experimenting with the game with themes from your teaching, you clarify what they already know about the subject.

1. Reflections on good teaching

How have you lately succeeded in creating a clear framework for your teaching? If not in all of your teaching, then perhaps in small parts of it.

- ▶ how did you manage that?
- ▶ what helped you?

What have you noticed in the students as signs that your teaching (content or form) made sense to them?

What are you already doing, which helps create a flexible learning environment for your students?

- ▶ *note*: something you don't initiate yourself can be something you allow them to do!
- ▶ what could be a next step to build on what is already happening?

In what situations lately have you experienced your students taking responsibility for their own learning?

- ▶ what happened?
- ▶ what did *you* do that helped them doing so?

How can you utilise all these great experiences in the future?

The good teacher

When discussing characteristics of a good teacher, several elements were pointed out. The project group takes for granted that the knowledge is in place in a professional teacher, so focus is on other aspects:

A good teacher is someone who is:

- Authentic and sincere
- Flexible and engaging
- Reflecting on own practice

Authentic and sincere

– be present, attentive, listen, be honest

Finn Skaarup Jensen says it like this: "A teacher needs to have a belief that the students want to learn." This has nothing to do with a naive trust that "everything will be fine if not now then later", but is about meeting the students where they are. It is perhaps the responsibility of the teacher to create meaning in the teaching, but this has to happen in collaboration with the students in order for them to be able to establish a relevant context and a practically useful meaning with what they have to learn.

One way can be to start from your own experiences and give examples from your own everyday life where possible. This helps create an authenticity the students can relate to, and can simultaneously function as an invitation to them about involving themselves and creating a link between the subject matter and their own everyday life, between theory and practice.

The project group recommends teachers to now and then abandon their own ideas of what is necessary for the students to learn, and instead open up, let go, and see what happens.

Be flexible and engaging

– don't just seize the moment, let others seize it too

It is about at times being able to stray away from what has been planned. To be able to continue in a direction that has emerged because of a certain question or need in the teaching, without really knowing where it will lead. This of course ties into knowledge, because the more you know your subject, the more you will be able to improvise within the limits of it.

It is also about daring to say, "Actually, I don't know that. Would you like to try and figure it out together?" Every now and then it is good to be an explorer on equal terms with the students and to gain knowledge and insights together.

A positive side effect of this attitude is that it trains the students in being actively involved. They are shown that they are listened to, that there is room for them in the learning process and that they too can take responsibility ("let's figure it out together").

This way of engaging students sets a standard and communicates that the teacher expects active participation and being able to help by adjusting the learning to the personal level of each student. The teachers in the project group intentionally work with several different roles in their teaching. They can be the expert who introduces a new subject, but can change during the teaching and play a more facilitating role, where they let the students explore the subject without explicit correct results.

Reflective of own practice – why do you do what you do?

To reflect on your own practice means being curious about yourself. Sometimes it can be very helpful to evaluate one's own practice, either alone or together with others. The project group expresses that this has to happen on an existential level as well: Why have I chosen this profession? What do I want to do as a teacher? What would I like to look back on with pride in 5, 10, 15 years from now?

It benefits not only you as a teacher, but also your students, colleagues and the management in your institution to see, hear and experience what is important to you. It also provides you with clues about where you want to move towards as a teacher and what you need in order to get there.

This isn't always as easy as it sounds, and according to the project group it takes courage to look yourself in the eyes. On the other hand, there are big potential advantages in increased job satisfaction and an increased awareness about what direction your professionalism is to develop.

Let's be honest. If you prefer to teach tomorrow the same way you taught yesterday, and hope that this is how it will always be, you probably wouldn't have read this far.

So what is actually your motive force?

Where do you want to go?

2. Reflection - the good teacher

Who in your nearest acquaintances (work or private life) will you describe as authentic and sincere?

- ▶ What is it in details the person says and does that you find authentic and sincere?
- ▶ How does this inspire you? In your work, and altogether as a person?

What would you like to look back on - with pride - in 5-10 years from now?

- ▶ If you coincidentally met one of your former students in the street, what would you like her telling you with enthusiasm about your time together?
- ▶ What would you like your family or acquaintances telling about you to others?

Exercise

If you are in for a little experiment, here is an exercise you can pursue with your students, which will definitely train your flexibility:

1. Chose an upcoming subject for your teaching (best if at least 2 or more lessons).
2. Describe in a few headlines (perhaps just key words) what the subject is about, and what the students are expected to have learned by the end of it.
3. Present this some time before the lessons are to begin, and explain that the students now have to plan the rest themselves, including telling you how and what you will be teaching.
4. Observe what your students do well, and tell them this as they go along.
5. When the whole course is over, have a talk about what went well and what could have been done differently if you were to repeat the process. Watch out! There is a risk that your students will like this and will want to try it again.

Your task in this exercise is to, no matter what, go along with what they plan and try to get the best out of it. Your formulated goals (your headlines or key words) have to be clear and understandable for the students, but the way they reach those goals is their decision. You have to act on their terms and simultaneously try to attain the goals you have formulated.

Afterwards, in a quiet moment, you can reflect on the following:

- ▶ What were you satisfied with in the exercise?
- ▶ How did you succeed in supporting your students on their terms, what concretely did you do well?
- ▶ What does this say about your strengths as a teacher?
- ▶ What new thoughts has the exercise given you about your teaching and about you as a teacher?

With these reflections in mind:

What could be a first little step towards making this happen?

What would be a concrete sign for you that some of it is starting to happen?

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The KIE-model to work pedagogically and didactically with innovation is available as book and website, so far only in Danish: www.kie-modellen.dk/.

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– The project group