

Raising Theoretical Concept Understanding In Courses With Journalist Students

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ABSTRACT: This is a study of teaching a theory course for journalism students, year three, preparing for thesis work. The purpose is to increase understandings of theoretical tensions in professions-oriented education and how they can be dealt with. Research questions are: 1. How are journalism students self-perception of theory and its relevance to them and their thesis, before and after a theory course using more student active learning elements? 2. How can self-perceptions be understood in relation to course evaluations and student performance? 3. What values can be understood as made possible of the different pedagogic elements and how are contextual aspects influencing? Didactic decisions for the course were guided by student-active learning: constructing learning through performing actions (Piaget, 1951), through experiential education (Dewey, 1938) emphasizing the learner in the learning process, and higher-level thinking skills (Bloom, 1956). Course aim was to socialize students into a more academic line of thinking, paired with strengthening them to integrate theory and practice. Therefore, the course combined following elements in progression: 1) Seminar, 2) Mini Lectures, and 3) Exercises. Method in the study is self-assessment (Bourke, 2010), first at the beginning of the course, second ten weeks after thesis for Bachelor degree. Course evaluation and teacher self-reflection is added as assessment perspective. Theory used to analyze the results is the embedding of research and inquiry through scaffolding (Healey et al, 2014). The analysis also includes Schulman's (2005) signature pedagogies. Results imply there is a need to engage in changes of perceptions of what journalism is (practice-academia). This confirms the vital importance for professional learning of knowledge setting types and the epistemic practices and resources they offer (Nerland and Jensen, 2014).

1 INTRODUCTION

Journalism education, increasingly deal with how to balance, combine and integrate journalism as an academic discipline and as a craft (de Burgh, 2003; Mari, 2015). Schulman (2005) describe this as a general challenge for all professional schools: "their pedagogies must measure up to the standards not just of the academy, but also of the particular professions" (p. 53).

This study takes on the challenge in profession oriented higher education as how to teach theory and the use of impact of student-active learning elements. Theory and method courses, as well as the thesis course, distinguish journalism in higher education from vocational training. Cairns and Sears (2010) describe the value of theory as "theoretical thinking" to make "sense of the world around us" (p. 161). It is about asking the simple questions, primarily why and seeking explanations for how things work. Cairns and Sears recommend "tracing each tree back to its roots, identifying how it is rooted in a few key premises" (ibid.).

Teaching theory with student-active learning elements make contributions to both educating for journalism as a craft and preparing for a future in academia. Student active learning implicates a way to align knowledge setting types and the epistemic practices and resources. Potential lies in a view on learning as co-construction where the student needs to be active in some way to learn (Piaget, 1951; Dewey, 1938; Bloom, 1956). Examples of student active learning are peer learning, co-teaching, project based education, collaborative learning etc.

The problem we are trying to solve in this study is to increase understandings of theoretical tensions in professions-oriented education and how they can be dealt with. The study is a formation of didactic decisions and an evaluation as students' self-assessment/, course evaluation and teacher self-reflections.

1.1 Research questions

The purpose is to increase understandings of theoretical tensions in professions-oriented education and how they can be dealt with. Research questions are:

1. How are journalism students' self-perception of theory and its relevance to them and their thesis, before and after a theory course using more student active learning elements?
2. How can self-perceptions be understood in relation to course evaluations and student performance?
3. What values can be understood as made possible of the different pedagogic elements and how are contextual aspects influencing?

2 BACKGROUND: THE COURSE

The course *Theories of Journalism and Media* 7,5 credits is the first in the third year in Journalism and Media Production Programme, 180 credits. After the theory course follows Methods 7,5 credits and Thesis 15 credits. 45 students attended the theory course. The learning objectives for the course, for the student should be able to, are:

- describe and contextualize scientific theories within the field of journalism and media,
- critically evaluate previous Swedish and international journalism and media studies,
- apply theories in journalistic research in formulate research questions...

Course design was *lectures, seminars and exercises*. *The lectures* were a theoretical overview and framework from us as teachers. The students each also prepared a mini-lecture in sessions for half of the class each with one teacher. Sessions lasted 4 hours and ended with a common discussion on theoretical perspectives on journalism and media. Lectures and the mini-lectures were not mandatory, but students' needed to notify in advance, so in the end all students attended. Ten scheduled lectures and a full day divided in half class for mini-lectures.

The seminars were mandatory and examined the theoretical knowledge in a particular area; gender, journalism and media studies. This seminar was also divided in half class and each seminar session lasted about 4 hours. By giving the students a specific chapter in the anthology *Media sensitivity for gender* (Hirdman and Kleberg, 2015) to prepare by collaboration in groups they first needed to answer questions. They also had to prepare an oral presentation and participate by posing new questions at the seminar, as well as participate in the final discussion that ended each seminar session on future journalism and gender issues.

Two exercises followed. The first exercise aimed to problematize and understand how using different theories to analyze the same phenomena. It started with a lecture on how digitization made possible user generated content and how journalistic professional ideals and theories on news values is involved and renegotiated. The students chose an example of journalistic usage of user generated content, which they uploaded to the learning management system. During the lecture, students made use of the material, analyzing it from various theories. The theories were: gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing and media logic. Each group got two theories (gatekeeping and media logic; agenda setting and media logic; framing and media logic), presented their analysis, and the day ended with a final discussion. The second exercise aim was to engage students in how to use theories to create a research question. The students got an initial lecture on what a scientific problem and a research question is and how theory can be involved in the creation of this. The students then analyzed approved students' bachelor thesis from the question: how was theory used for the thesis scientific problem and research questions? The exercise ended by using the course literature, and the knowledge from the mini lectures on how to make a scientific problem for an essay.

The students' final exam was a home assignment with following questions:

Question 1: Compare what is written about a theory of your interest, in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* with what is written about this theory in *the Handbook of Journalism Research*. Do you find similarities and differences between the Swedish and the international handbook in how to approach and describe the theory? What are the similarities and differences? What do you think about these similarities and differences? What are the benefits and what is less beneficial, and why?

Question 2: Based on the seminar presentation of the theme gender, journalism and media studies, choose a theme that captured your interest in gender issues and provide an exhaustive description of the gender perspectives presented in the literature by:

- a) Describe how the theme is presented in the literature: the theories and concepts that explain the gender perspective? (*Media sensibility of gender* and *Handbook of Journalism Research*)
- b) Based on these theories and concepts, how would you explore journalism gender representation? Give at least three examples of theories that could provide additional knowledge about journalism gender representation, based on the consulted literature.

Question 3: Describe how to use a scientific theory within the field of journalism to develop a problem in your coming essay.

Question 1 connected to the mini-lectures, question 2 the seminar and question 3 connected to the second exercise.

3 METHOD

3.1 Self-assessment

Self-assessment as a method can support and enhance learning (Bourke, 2010). By using this method we try to enhance student learning and to get an insight to how this enhanced learning process might be understood in relation to course design. Self-assessments were anonymously and voluntarily and conducted two times during the course: 1) at a lecture first week of the course, 2) ten weeks after the exams of the bachelor thesis course, with assistance from our colleagues in the project course.

3.2 Course evaluation

Course evaluation as a method mostly do not measure teaching effectiveness, instead they are correlated with grade expectations and are influenced by attitudes towards teacher appearances and gender (Stark and Freishtat, 2014). Student critique towards course design is unrelated to effective teaching (ibid.). The course evaluation in this study follows the directives that apply to the entire university. A common template makes a manageable material on a general level easy to assemble. The result mainly show how students perceive the course compared to other courses at the university.

3.3 Teacher self-evaluation

Teacher self-evaluation as method is self-assessment and self-evaluation of knowledge and performance directed towards a self-directed growth (Airasian and Gullickson, 1994). This is accomplished by identifying problems, information-gathering, interpretations and decisions leading to education improvement. A challenge is that teachers tend to overrate own teaching abilities (McNeil and Popham, 1973). We try to bear this in mind in a form of self-critique strategy. Also, we aim to make observations of students' general academic progress to determine teaching success (MacLeod, 1988), instead of only emphasizing students' scores on achievement tests (Jones and Airasian, 1995).

4 THEORY

4.1 The embedding of research and inquiry through scaffolding

For the course we used the embedding of research and inquiry through scaffolding (see Healey et al, 2014) as a guideline. Hence, we created a progression in both theory and student active learning to scaffold student independence and a progression in understanding and using theory. Scaffolding is also used to analyze the results.

4.2 Signature pedagogies

Schulman's (2005) signature pedagogies are "the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions (2005, p. 52). Schulman proposes we study pedagogies of the professions to "gain insights into teaching that cross both professional lines and the divide between the liberal and the professional" (p. 22). We use signature pedagogies to reflect on our teaching methods as guided by the discipline in which we are situated. This means we ask a question according to signature pedagogies three dimensions (surface, deep, implicit) formulated as: What is taking place in the classroom, how are they present and what beliefs do they bring about professional attitudes, values and dispositions?

5 RESULTS

5.1 Student self-assessment's

The first student self-assessment was answered by 32 of 45 students. The second self-assessment was answered by 30 of 45 students. It is uncertainty concerning which students' participated in the two self-assessments. Still, the results can indicate changes in self-assessment to be further discussed.

Comparing self-assessment/serie 1 and 2, there is an increasingly positive attitude towards the thesis as rewarding rather than only strenuous:

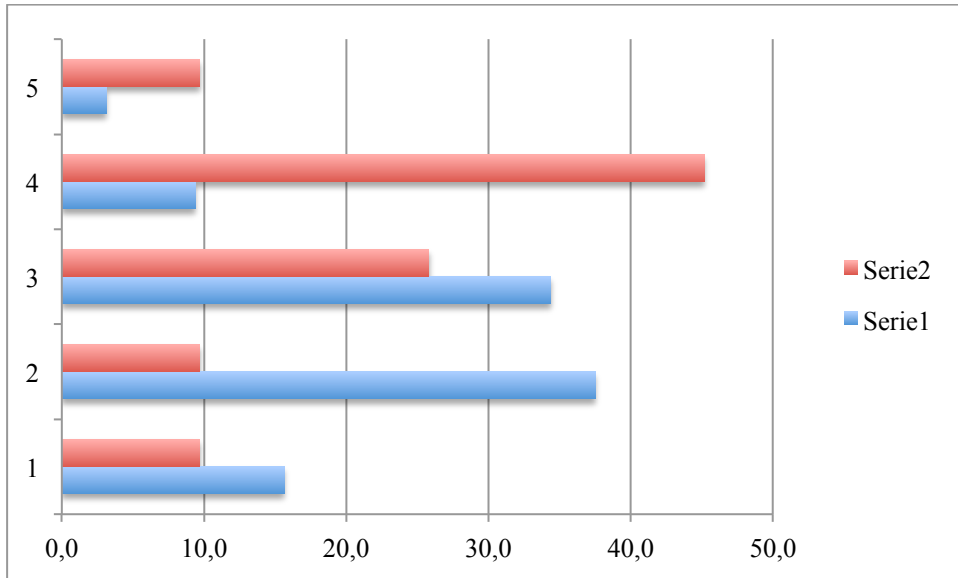


Fig. 1: Self-assessment of attitude towards the thesis (5 looking forward to it, 1 finding it strenuous, percentage of N for each series/self-assessment).

There is also an increase in self-assessment of having more knowledge to describe at least three theories:

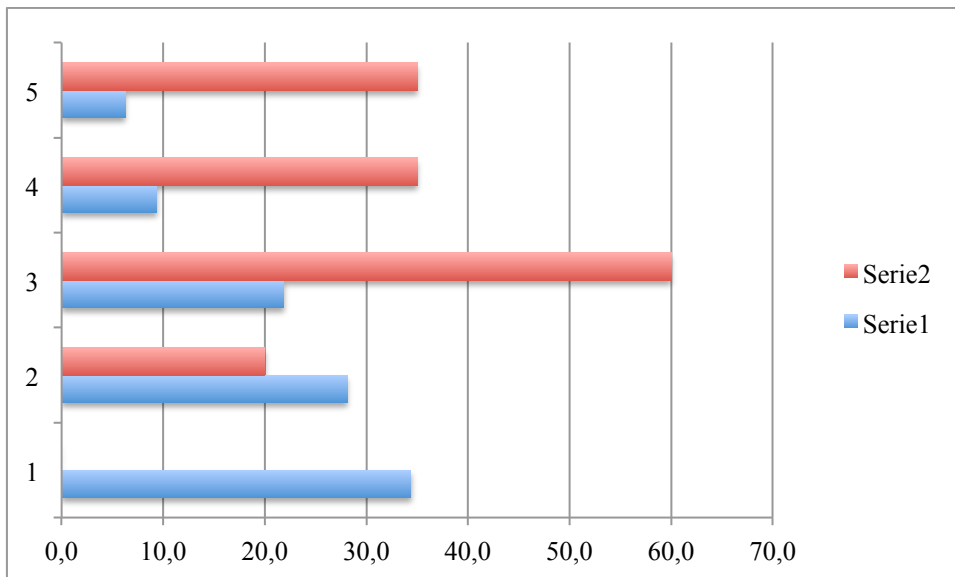


Fig. 2: Self-assessment of knowledge to describe at least three theories (5 is with ease, 1 is with great difficulties, percentage of N for each series/self-assessment).

At the same time students' express changing assessment of theory after the theory course and the thesis, to that theory is not important to make good journalistic products:

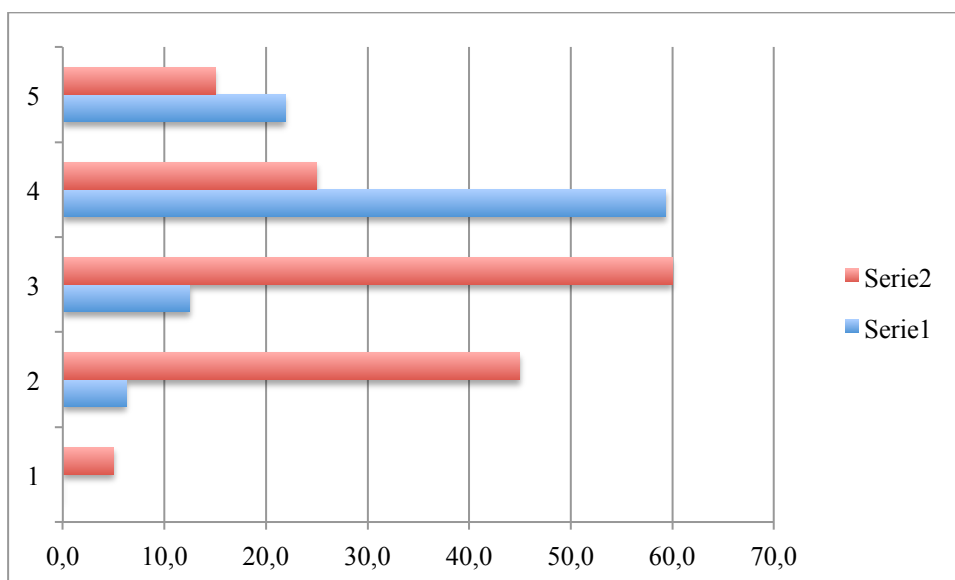


Fig. 3: Self-assessment of theory and the important to make good journalistic products (5 is that theory is important and 1 is that theory is unimportant, percentage of N for each series/self-assessment)

5.2 Course evaluation

Course evaluation outcome is based on one third of the students answered the questionnaire and the results then must be interpreted with caution. (18 students) This evaluation was published on course website MyMoodle and was open from the last week of the course and closed four weeks later. One indication from the students' perspective expressed in the questionnaire indicates that this is a demanding course and difficult to achieve self-confidence. Several comments state that the lectures were too few and the abstractions from theory to practice needed more lessons about the process directed by teachers on theory. At the same time the course is according to the survey responses perceived as abstract and theoretical, which both can be interpreted as positive and negative. Furthermore, most of the course has stimulated creativity and critical thinking according to the answers. This is also consistent with how the learning objective about critical thinking is met. The majority of the students passed the course and nearly half passed with distinction.

5.3 Teacher self-reflection

We as teachers tried to create a space for students exploring own experiences and ideas in relation to theory. We particularly tried to teach the students how to identify and research issues through theory and its relation to current journalism research and the students' own experiences and thoughts on journalism issues. Using different student active learning methods in a scaffolding way was only framed for students as developing and expanding theoretical skills with the aim to prepare them for the final thesis. The student's general academic progression in this frame was met. However, integrating theory and practice was only implicitly part of the teaching activities.

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND STUDENT LEARNING

In the program there is an existing common view on teaching to think, act and perform as journalistic craftsmen separate from theory. Most students reflect this. To impede journalism as the journalistic craft with theory only for the bachelor thesis, means there is an existing harmony in norms and values for teaching as: learn to master journalism by doing journalism and to learn from former journalists. In this context, teaching theory and teaching it with student active learning as active learning in promoting critical thinking and independent work, then clash with existing signature pedagogy culture. The clash is expressed as critique towards needing to learn theory that is abstract and the need to make it concrete.

Student-active learning promotes perspective-making, and theoretical work benefit from student-active learning. The abstract thinking of theory is difficult for students looking for facts and "the truth". How to handle the uncertainties of truth, by including theory as perspective-making and perspective-shifting, is a particular challenge for profession education.

This confirms the vital importance for professional learning of knowledge setting types and the epistemic practices and resources they offer (Nerland and Jensen, 2014). Bridge-building is needed. In this course several education events were designed to make the students think about the value for theory both for their thesis and their future profession. This makes the students the bridge-builders in the learning process, following active learning. However, teaching can and should assist in this bridge-building to make theory courses more relevant for profession education through teaching that integrate theory and practice. Scaffolding of this form of integration in the whole program will benefit this development.

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