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Observing and interpreting quality in social science teaching

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Title of your paper: Observing and interpreting quality in social science teaching

Abstract (300 words)

Two connected models for observation and interpretation of quality in social science teaching is set up and discussed. Model 1 (The funnel: a model for observing and interpreting teaching events in academic subjects) and model 2 (QUISST quality model connecting form, content and goals in social science teaching) The models have clear relevance for other subjects, as well. Basically, the model is built around an understanding of teaching as communication, and communication consists of utterances (verbal and non-verbal), which in a Bakhtin sense are always composed of form, content and goal / function. These three aspects of utterances constitute focus points of observations of the communicative coherence in the teaching. However, since teaching is always governed by a normative basis: goal / intended function, which states the justification (legitimation) for a specific teaching to take place at all, it is necessary, however, to let this normative basis guide the interpretations of whether the observed coherence or lack of coherence is an expression of didactic quality. The presentation will point to the normative basis for social science teaching, and with that as a basis provide an example of how social science teaching quality can be analysed.

Extended summary (1000 words, excluding reference list) Include introduction, theoretical background, methods, aims, preliminary findings/findings, results, theoretical and education significance, relevance to the QUINT ambition and the reference list.

This presentation represents part of my work in the QUINT project Quality in Social Science Teaching (QUISST)

The theoretical basis of the article is threefold. 1) A Bakhtin-inspired communicative approach, 2) sociocultural ethnographic classroom research and 3) social science didactics / social science teaching discourse. Discourse is not only understood as language, but as language in context, which means that it's not only communication as spoken words, utterances, but also communication as actions (doings) that counts.

There are two complementary approaches to the observation of teaching to consider. The first involves the methodological understanding of *classroom ethnography*: that is, what may be meaningfully observed in the classroom, and how do we go about observing it. The second approach involves the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon to be observed. If the focus is on achievement and successful teaching, the theoretical basis could be learning theory; if the focus is on the task quality and good teaching, the theoretical basis could be subject didactic theory and pedagogical theory. If the focus is on Discursive practices, which are assumed to be the basis of both successful and good teaching, the theoretical basis must be supplemented with communication theory.

In line with James Paul Gee (2009) we extend discourses to include actions (or doings) that can be considered non-verbal communication, which necessarily must be understood in its cultural context, here a social science classroom. Students raising their hands in a classroom tells wordless that they have something to say. Therefore, it is considered an utterance. It has a form (hand-raising), a content (I have relevant knowledge to share) and a goal or function (student participation). In a different context, for example on the football field, hand-raising (form) can for example mean: I am injured (content), stop the game (goal or function) means a different thing to raise the hand. In this broad understanding Discourse include ways of acting that are recognized in the context as appropriate ways to express oneself. In a social science teaching context it makes sense and it is a meaningful communication to make statistical calculations, to make inquiries, to establish and test hypothesis, to use sources and source criticism, to follow deliberative norms of debate, to write in specific genres, to use specific types of concepts (classifying or metaphorical) (Shanahan & Shanahan 2012) and to communicate by a wide range of other actions (doings) that mark the subject's ways of doing (Carter 2007). Even a perfectly worded utterance can be meaningless or absurd if it is out of context, for instance, if a student uses subject discourse at a family dinner conversation. An illustrative example is about reasoning. Social science Discourse is not (only) about being able to establish *true arguments*, it is also (and perhaps especially) about being able to establish *useful and meaningful arguments for decision-making*, in both controversial and uncontroversial situations, that is, *practical or strategic arguments*, and also *ethically sound arguments*. It is also about being able to use an argument in *deliberation*, where you *listen to and respect your opponent's argument, to reach a joint decision*. If we are to identify a general difference between social science Discourse and mathematical Discourse in form of reasoning it is that in mathematics the core of an argument is *truth and logic*, whereas in social science there is an element of *negotiation* about *which argument is most appropriate*. Regarding goal and function, a key difference between language arts (LA) and social science is that ultimately, social science aims for *strategic and democratic decision-making*, and LA ultimately aims to *use language and understand cultural forms*. The differences to these two other subjects are of course hard drawn, to clarify the point. The differences have a profound influence on what is recognised as valid utterance in the subjects. Utterances always have a form, content and a goal or intended function (Bakhtin 1987: 76ff), and when teachers plan and conduct their lessons, they connect form, content, and goal / intended function in ways that are acknowledged by their respective subjects, whether they are aware of it or not. And this is exactly where we will be able to observe and judge communicative quality of social science teaching.

The overarching goal or intended function of social science as a subject is to help to form the democratic citizen. This means that teaching must extend beyond the narrow classroom and connect with the surrounding community locally, nationally, and globally. In social science, this goal may be narrowed to political and economic Bildung (see below). But ofcourse, we cannot observe Bildung as such. What we may observe are actions (utterances) during teaching events and the contexts of teaching events (Ivanič 1998: 64), and we may consider how these are structured. The question is, are the form and content of a teaching event connected in ways that fulfil the subject's goal / intended function (Krogh & Jacobsen 2019)? Thus, high quality may be understood as a question of whether the content and form of teaching practices directly or indirectly contribute to the goal / intended function. Content encompasses knowledge, skills, and values to be addressed; form comprises *ways* and *modes* of addressing knowledge, skills, and values in the classroom. 'Ways' are observed as social actions in the classroom; 'modes' are observed in the use of artefacts, both intellectual (concepts, knowledge forms) and physical (textbooks, technology, classroom architecture etc).

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It is concluded that communicative quality in social science teaching, and perhaps in teaching in general, can be observed as utterances in the classroom analysed for their coherence between form, content, and goal / intended function, which accordingly are the basic elements of an observation tool developed. The tool aims to keep focus on form, content, and goal / intended function of the basic subject discourse, which functions as an underlying structuring of classroom communication. It is also concluded that the normative basis for social science teaching, can be operationalized and thus serve as a guidance of interpretations of observations made in the classroom of the form and content of teaching.

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