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Ethical Learning through Meetings with Others

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Abstract: Different kinds of meetings are natural for every student and teacher in schools around the world. This study deals with matters of ethics as a relation, meetings with Others, narratives, reflection and learning experiences. In a secondary school in northern Sweden eight students and one teacher worked within a course where different guests were invited into the classroom - a homosexual, a refugee and a disabled person. The aim of this article is to elucidate, enable understanding for and discuss students' and a teacher's learning experiences through their meetings with Others. The empirical data was created through close observation, field notes, reflective journals and e-mail communication. Theoretically the study is based on the philosophies of Emanuel Lévinas and Nel Noddings.

Keywords: Ethics, Learning, Meetings, Narrative, Reflection

Introduction

DIFFERENT KINDS OF meetings are natural for every student and teacher in schools around the world. This study deals with matters of ethics¹ as a relation, meetings with Others², narratives, reflection and learning experiences in a secondary school in northern Sweden. Noddings (2002a) stresses that: 'Education may be thought of as a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation' (p. 283). This means that there can be a great potential for learning different kinds of knowledge in meetings, which in this case can be considered as real-life meetings where connections between life in school and outside school are made. These real-life meetings can deal with a person's inner life and feelings. I agree with Lévinas (1969) that ethics are inherent in every human action and relation, and hence meetings, and this results in consequences of an ethical kind in school. Teaching is as Campbell (2003) says: '... a profoundly moral activity' (p. 116). She also emphasizes that it is through these relations and meetings in school that the students learn important values like honesty, respect and tolerance (Campbell, 2003). The curricula for the Swedish pre-school and compulsory school also stress a special focus on the importance for students to develop an ethical attitude to the world around them (The Ministry of Education, 1994; 1998). Lesnick (2006) describes and discusses students' encounters with fictive persons and events in the literature. She understands that these meetings

with literature in the classroom can enable students to practice for example their empathic ability and their ability to make value judgements. In this case fictive encounters and narratives are in focus, but arguably the intentions in Lesnick's study can be applied to real-life meetings with living persons in a classroom. Lévinas (1969) describes real-life meetings as face-to-face encounters that can both challenge you personally and enable learning of new knowledge. These face-to-face encounters, represent for Lévinas (ibid), a welcoming of the Other. The important thing is that when I meet the Other I do not limit him or her to the sameness with me, the Other must have the opportunity to be something other than me. There are many challenging thoughts in Lévinas' philosophy, because it encourages us as people to welcome strangers and those who are different than ourselves and not try to change them. This is perhaps not as easy as it may seem. However Lévinas (1969) claims that there are many opportunities for learning from each other in face-to-face encounters, which can lead to development on different levels in school and in life in general.

According to Lesnick (2006), as mentioned above, narratives in education of literature, can play a vital role in students' development of different skills. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also call attention to the importance of narratives in education. They stress that experiences grow out of other experiences, and that experiences are both personal and social. Persons have to be understood as individuals but also as parts of a social context. An individual child's learning takes place in a context, for example a school (ibid).

¹ The words ethics and morals are used as synonyms in this study and hence in this article. See for example Colnerud and Granström (2002), who claim that these words can be used synonymously.

² I use the capital O, because it means others in specific meaning. The Other is viewed as a subject and an embodied individual. For further reading on this, see Lévinas (1969).



As I understand it, this is also valid for all persons, not just children. Stroobants (2005) and Clandinin et al (2006) mean that a narrative often is based on life-experiences and through telling, writing and/or listening to stories there is an opportunity for learning about oneself and about each other. Stroobants (2005) also means that in this telling, writing and/or listening to stories reflection is an important part for development. Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) suggest that reflection can be done before, during and after for example a situation or a process. Through for example written reflection a writer has an opportunity to stand back and revise and rethink (Appelbee, 1984). This creative process of questioning oneself and activities in a school for example, can lead to individual learning for the writer and changes in school (Starratt, 1994; Ghaye and Ghaye 1998).

The aim of this article is to elucidate, enable understanding for and discuss students' and a teacher's learning experiences through their meetings with Others.

Methodological basis

Learning Experiences in the Life-World

The study focuses on learning experiences in the life-world, or to be more specific, in meetings with Others in the classroom. Husserl (1995) means that it is important to investigate the reality as it shows itself. In order to investigate the reality, every study, must begin in the lived experience (van Manen, 1997; Alerby, 1998). van Manen describes that a goal for phenomenological research is to gain '... a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experiences' (p. 9). Humans are situated in the life-world, which is a concept explored by the phenomenological movement (see e.g. Husserl, 1995; Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Life has many nuances and is changeable over time. The life-world is the basis of our lives, our every-day world, which we take for granted. I also want to stress in accordance with Merleau-Ponty (1996) that in the life-world body and mind are intimately intertwined, which means that they are a whole and that they can have mutual impact on each other.

Settings of the Research

The study took place in a secondary school in a small town in Northern Sweden, where students can choose courses individually one afternoon (100 minutes) per week. The students work in each course for one four week-period. 'Young meets ...', is a course, designed by a teacher, where three guests, people with different life-experiences visited the school and told their narratives. The guests were a homosexual person, a refugee and a disabled person. The purpose

of this student course was to enable students to meet different people and through these meetings grow as humans and develop their ability to feel empathy and respect for Others - two important values in school and life. Another purpose was to practice the idea that ethics should pervade the activities in school, which for example is emphasized in the curricula for the Swedish compulsory school (Ministry of Education, 1994). The teacher also saw this course as an opportunity for both the students and the teacher herself to deepen their understanding of different people and develop their individual learning through these meetings. It could involve learning about, for example, different subjects, skills, values and personality. Each visit was divided into three parts. The first part was reflection and question-time before the visit. The second part was the visit for the day. The different guests told their life-stories for about one hour and the students had opportunities to ask questions. The third part was post-reflection time. During the course the students documented the activities in the classroom by video camera, but the film is not a part of the study.

Data Creation

Eight students, all girls, and their teacher, also female, participated in this study. The students come from different classes in the same school and they are between 13 and 16 years old. The students chose to participate in this course voluntarily. The teacher in the study is the one who held the course 'Young meets ...'.

The empirical data was created through close observation, field notes, reflective journals and e-mail communication (see e.g. van Manen, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To grasp the learning experiences in this course I as a researcher participated in and documented the students' and the teacher's interactions and activities in this course for four weeks. After each visit I typed my reflections and e-mailed them to the teacher and she read them through and she e-mailed her reflections on my reflections back to me. During the course both the students and the teacher kept reflective journals to grasp their own learning through this work. The students' reflective journals were handed in to the teacher after each lesson. The teacher continuously gave responses on the students' reflections, by giving them comments in the book after each visit. At the beginning of each lesson the students had the opportunity to reflect on and comment the teacher's responses. Therefore there were an on-going dialogue in writing between the students and the teacher. I as a researcher read and analyzed both the students' and the teacher's reflective journals.

The teacher, the students and their parents were informed of the study orally as well as in writing, and participation in the study was voluntary. Informed consent was given from all students and their parents, and also by the teacher. Fictive names are used when presenting the students' and the teacher's voices.

Analysis of the Empirical Data

Interpretation of empirical data is a creative process (van Manen, 1997). In this case it means to grasp the meaning of the learning experiences that the students and the teacher mediate. I want to express and enable understanding for the views of these different parties through my interpretation. The empirical data was analyzed thoroughly and I tried to find similarities and differences to find some main features.

During the analytic process I have created a narrative or a *synecdoche* (Henriksson, 2004, 2006): one for the students and one for the teacher, as a way of enabling generic understanding for their learning processes. A *synecdoche* means a narrative that is based and created on the empirical data in the study and this mediates my understanding of the students' and the teacher's voices. The creation of a narrative out of the participants' voices enables me as a researcher to '... see differently, to move between the particular and the generic, aware of what each says to enrich the other' (Lemon, 2007, p. 178). Narratives create opportunities for a rich interpretation and making meaning out of empirical data (ibid). In working with the *synecdoches* I have tried to keep the interpretation close to the participants' texts and the interactions occurring in the classroom, but without direct citations, in order to create an understanding that does justice to the empirical data. The aim with the *synecdoches* is to invite the reader into a context, in this case a classroom, to enable understanding and a feeling for what the students and the teacher said, did and reflected on in this course. With the intersubjectivity in mind I let the students and the teacher read their stories to ensure that they could recognize themselves in the stories and that they felt that this was the way they wanted to be described.

When I had made the *synecdoches* for the students and the teacher, the analysis of the empirical data was deepened, because I once again read the data and interpreted it more in detail, which gives a more specific understanding.

Learning Experiences through Meetings with Others

Generic Understanding of the Empirical Data

In the following section I describe my generic understanding of the empirical data through two *synecdoches*. In the students' *synecdoche* the eight students' voices have melted together into one narrative. And the teacher's story represents the single teacher's voice.

Students' story

This course will be interesting I hope, because I like to meet new people, I thought, when I entered the classroom. Karen, the teacher, told us that we would write reflective journals during this course. I am not sure how to do that, but I hope that I will learn how to do it.

- What are we going to do with that brown box? Anne said.

- You have the opportunity to write down your questions for the guests on small sheets and put them in the box and then the guest picks questions from the box, Karen said.

I was relieved, I am not sure if I dare to ask questions directly to the guests, because I don't know them and I don't know how they will react to my questions.

- Why don't we put our questions directly to the guest? I am going to try that, Sarah said.

- You can do it both ways, Karen said.

During the course we met a homosexual, a refugee and a disabled person and they told us about themselves. I learnt how different people can live their lives. I realized that I have prejudices against other people, and that made me think about how I treat other people. At the end Karen asked us what we have learnt during these meetings and Caroline said:

- I think that I learn better when someone tells their own experiences, than if I should have read about, for example, refugees in a book. It gets more real this way.

- I agree with you, and it's good to see the world from their perspectives, Jenny said. But I also think that I cannot fully understand what they have gone through in life.

- No, I don't think so either, Anne said, but it is anyway good to hear their stories, because I have learnt so much from them. When you hear about people who have experienced difficulties, I am reminded that I have a good life and that I should more often appreciate that.

We have used a video camera to document this course and I think that some of us have felt really nervous when the camera was on, but

after a while I got more and more used to the camera. Now I am really looking forward to cutting the film into a documentary about these meetings. And hopefully it will be a good film, so we can send it in to a film competition for students.

Teacher's story

Since I read in a book about ethics in every-day school life I have thought about how to develop meeting places where students can practice their ability to feel empathy for other people. I then organized this course 'Young meets ...' with the aims of deepening understanding of other people and thus growing as humans.

Through the reflective journals I had the opportunity to get to know my students in a personal way, because I could read about their feelings, thoughts and questions. They were not that used to reflecting in a journal, but I think you have to have time and opportunity to practice this way of working. And after the course when I have read their reflections I really think that the students have learnt to reflect on their learning process. During the meetings with the guests the students have been quite silent and not asked many questions. That has made me a bit stressed. I know that they have written many thoughts in their journals, and why do they not mediate their voices in the classroom? It made me wonder how I as a teacher can make them talk openly.

I think that the meetings showed what learning through feelings is. When you learn through your feelings and not only with your mind I think that the knowledge will be a real learning for life. I hope that this kind of learning also will lead to some activity, that the thoughts and feelings have an impact on our life together with each other. In these meetings with our guests I learnt to think about what I say, but also the importance of *how* I say things.

Through the above stories I have mediated my generic understanding of the participants' learning experiences in this course, and now I want to express my thoughts about the specific understanding of the data. The specific understanding is presented through a main theme – *Learning from the Other*. This theme consists of two different aspects - *Learning different kinds of knowledge, values and skills through the whole body* and *Appreciating each other and what they do*.

Specific Understanding – Learning from the Other

The main theme in the specific understanding is that the students and the teacher are *learning from the Other*. This means that in this course there are opportunities for learning from others in different relationships, for example between students and students, students and the teacher, students and the guests and the teacher and the guests. Through Karen's (the teacher) dialogue both in the classroom and in the students' reflective journals she encourages the students to challenge their own learning. Noddings (2006) believes that this, to enable students to reflect on what and how they learn and for what purpose they learn, is something that a teacher should do, in order to develop their learning and critical thinking. Karen asked questions in the students' reflective journals for them to reflect on and answer. Examples of questions are:

What was the most important thing you learnt?

Do you have prejudices? Can you talk openly about your prejudices with your friends?

When do you think that you learn the most and the best?

Do you feel that what you learnt this Wednesday, will be useful for you later [in life]?

As a teacher I feel many times that it is hard to involve these kind of things (emotionally loaded) in a natural way in my teaching. Do you have any suggestions how I, as a teacher, could do this?

The questions deal with a lot of important things: reflection on own learning, learning-styles, how we respond to each other (e.g. prejudices), life-long learning and student influence in education. These questions can function as starters in a reflection process on their learning for the students, because she asks them questions which she expects them to answer in writing.

The students express the view that they learn a lot from the guests. One student writes: 'Today I have learnt that too much alcohol can cause a handicap' (Linda, reflective journal). Here this student reflects on something that seems to be a thought she has not reflected on that much before – that alcohol can cause a lot of accidents in the society. Another student writes: 'I have learnt that people with a handicap maybe live their lives a bit differently, but apart from for a couple of things, most of them are exactly like anyone else (Cathrine, reflective journal). I suggest that this quotation shows that this student has drawn

an important conclusion from the meeting with the man with the handicap. This learning will probably affect her thinking and action next time she meets a person with a handicap.

The students in the study also show that they reflect in a wider way on their new knowledge:

It is easy to feel sorry for people and maybe that feels nice for them for a while, but you are not helping anyone by feeling sorry for them, then it would be better to try to help them to develop (Emilia, reflective journal).

The student shows an awareness of what she has learnt from the man with the handicap. In his situation – still partly paralyzed – it probably would be natural to feel sorry for him, but the student reflects further on this when she expresses that this feeling sorry for would not help him to manage and develop in life. There are other things you can do if you want to help a person rather than feeling sorry for him or her.

In the teacher's comments to the students in their reflective journal Karen also expresses a feeling that she learns a lot herself from the guests and the students, when she writes (in the students' reflective journals):

I realized this Wednesday that I am after all pretty prejudiced.

The new people we will meet will receive our new way of treating people, which I think is more humble and less prejudiced!

I think it is such good fun to be a part of this course... 8 interested, curious and skilful girls. Can it be better?

Learning different kinds of knowledge, values and skills through the whole body

In these meetings with the Other one aspect of the specific understanding is that the participants in the study express thoughts that they *learn different kinds of knowledge, values and skills through the whole body*. The students express views that they have learnt a lot about different life-styles and different human life experiences. One student writes:

You have learnt how it can be to come to another country, but I think that nobody can understand it... I think that you learn a lot more when somebody has experienced an accident or something else than if you [the teacher] should stand in front of us and tell us about it (Jenny, reflective journal).

It is likely that the meetings made impressions on the students' own lives, because they connect the stories told by the guests to their own lives. One of the guests, the disabled person, told them that he had been in an accident because he was drunk and walked in the middle of the road when a car hit him. This had impact on the girls, when one of them wrote: 'I learn to rethink things. Like now then, that you should be careful with alcohol' (Sarah, reflective journal). One of the students made connections between what the disabled man said and her own life and how she wants to treat other people: 'I think a lot of about not treating for example disabled persons differently than other people. When I meet Kristen in the ninth grade, I can stop and talk to her. She is very nice even if she has a handicap' (Anne, reflective journal). Noddings (2006) argues that connection to your own life and interest in a matter are two important aspects in learning processes. She means that: 'When we are genuinely interested, we listen and read attentively' (p. 24). I think that the students in this study express a genuine interest in the guests' life-stories through their active and reflective listening.

The students' express above that they have learnt new skills through the meetings with others, but they also write that they their knowledge has deepened. A student writes:

It was fun to get answers to all questions, because certain things you cannot guess, how it for example feels to "come out" and have the guts to tell [that you are homosexual] to your parents, friends and others. To hear people tell how it can be is pretty good, you learn a lot and so on. Some of the things you already knew but then you had the chance to hear more deeply and then you feel empathy for other people's feelings and life (Caroline, reflective journal).

This student writes that she already had knowledge about the subject that the guests talked about, but maybe her knowledge was situated on a shallow level in her mind and body before these meetings. Through face-to-face meetings with people with different life-experiences the knowledge became alive, and that is maybe why the knowledge affected her in a deeper way. It can be assumed that the reason for deepened learning in this case can be learning through feelings. The teacher has also realised the importance of learning through feelings. She expresses an opinion that these meetings enhance learning through feelings when she says:

I have got knowledge that you can feel in your stomach and in heart through these meetings. This knowledge was easy to achieve, interesting to take part in, and I will probably remember

this better than if I should have read it in a book (Karen, written in a student's reflective journal).

To learn, not only cognitively, but also through feelings can lead to a deeper understanding and learning about something. This is emphasized by Merleau-Ponty (1996) when he stresses the importance of the body in learning processes. We learn and experience through our whole body. Feelings in your stomach and heart are bodily expressions for learning in the teacher's example. The students also express the view that they are learning through their feelings and they feel empathy for the guests: 'The most important thing I learnt was to see from his point of view... I really feel sorry for him, sad, sad. You don't want to experience anything like that... I got really touched by his story' (Jenny, reflective journal). Noddings (2006) stresses that the source of the information is of importance in learning processes and if the students experience a 'strong affective response' to the person who gives the information, they tend to remember the knowledge better (p. 27). Through the meetings Karen also learnt about herself as a teacher from reading my field notes from the meetings in the course. She writes in an email to me after reading my field notes 'I could look upon myself as a teacher with different eyes. I borrowed your glasses... I see it as a great privilege that you take part in this student project! Already I have learnt a lot and I have got much to reflect on!'

Appreciating each other and what they do

Another important aspect of the specific understanding is that this course creates opportunities for moments where the students and the teacher can *appreciate each other and what they do*. In Karen's responses in the reflective journals of the students she appreciates, confirms and encourages the students with her words. She writes for example:

To write a reflective journal is really not that strange, you try to write some lines about how you think/feel/wonder. You don't need to worry about that! You'll get used to it!

Thank you for sharing your reflections with me.

It would be interesting to hear your thoughts.

I have noticed that you like people, so this [course] suits you. Have you thought about your future choice of profession?

I agree with you – that you learn more when you hear people talk about their own experiences.

I can assume that all these sentences must feel good for the students when they read them and hopefully it will enable them to develop themselves even more. Confirmation is an important part of moral education, as Noddings (2006) writes. She means that real confirmation that matters can only take place in a relationship, in this case it means between the teacher and her students. The teacher has to know the student well enough to make a reasonable confirmation that strengthens the student. Karen also encourages the students to change when she for example writes: 'How can we be less prejudiced? Do you have any suggestions?' (Karen, written in a student's reflective journal). Here she creates an opportunity for the students to rethink this and come up with their own suggestions. This means that Karen also encourages student influence and responsibility. To summarise, I interpret it as, these comments to the students show that Karen values her students individually and that she's trying to see and meet them as equals. This is expressions of care and trust for her students. These above thoughts have close connection to the concept *appreciative inquiry*, which focuses on the positive experiences and what we (e.g. people in an organisation) want more of (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

[Appreciative inquiry] deliberately seeks to discover people's exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities... And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible (Cooperrider, 2001, p. 12).

The idea of making a documentary film of these meetings also has the potential of appreciating what happened in this classroom, because the learning experiences that occurred will be saved for the future as visual images of special moments. This has a permanence, which can allow the students and the teacher to see the film many times afterwards and reflect upon it. Narratives, presented in a visual way, like films, can apart from of appreciating practice, also open up possibilities for reflection on practice and learning from each other (Lemon, 2007). Learning from Others can occur between the students and the teacher in the study, but it can also involve more people. Because the students and the teacher can also decide to share their film with other people in school for example, so that they also get the chance to see and hear what happened in this course. Karen also expresses in an email to me that she wants us to share our reflections and learning from this project with her colleagues, when she writes: 'How can we share with others about this learning process and how can we encourage others to develop as pedagogues?' (written in e-mail to Ulrika). She also

writes in her own reflective journal about sharing the learning: 'I feel that this project will succeed, maybe be even so successful, that I and Ulrika will write a book about it'. These two last quotations from Karen show appreciation of the achievements in the classroom, and a will to share that learning experience with others.

One of the students also writes about the idea of spreading the learning experiences from this course to others in school. She reflects on the importance of meeting different people that they as students perhaps normally do not meet. She writes: 'I think that you should talk more about these matters [homosexuality, immigration and handicaps] in other parts of the education in school' (Sara, reflective journal). This quotation underlines that students in school should have many opportunities to talk about their urgent questions.

Discussion

Learning and ethical learning – what are the differences and the similarities? There are no sharp distinctions between these two concepts. A teacher's mission in school in Sweden has many purposes: for example to help children to develop their learning in subjects, and to help children to develop an ethical attitude to the world around. This is stated in the curricula - Lpo94 and Lpfö98 – for the Swedish preschool and school (The Ministry of Education, 1994; 1998). These curricula stress a special focus on ethical issues in education. It is said that ethics shall pervade all activities in schools. The question is then – how can that be done? The first mission deals more with factual knowledge in a subject and the other refers more to values, skills and behaviours. I consider that there can be problems with separating these parts of a teacher's mission, because there can be a risk that one or the other of these parts are not considered that much in an educational setting. The mission in the curricula is, as I see it, to draw these two parts together instead of separating them, when it is for example said that ethics shall pervade all the activities in school. It is not then said that learning in subjects shall be diminished, no – there is no competition between the 'subject mission' and the 'ethical mission'. I interpret it that in this student course, the two perspectives of 'subject mission' and 'ethical mission' have melted together into a unity that I think we can call *ethical learning*. This suggests that the participants in the study have developed different skills and they have hopefully learnt new knowledge or deepened the knowledge they already had. They have probably also learnt about values and behaviours through these meetings. When a learning process also deals in a conscious way with questions about our ethical attitude to the world

around (moral education or character education) I suggest that this means ethical learning. In this, ethics means something that is inherent in every human relation (Lévinas, 1969) and this has close connections to Noddings (2002b) when she emphasizes that ethics is relational and it is about natural caring for the Other. This means to me, that ethics can be seen as the underlying base in the activities in school – which for example suggests that acting in an ethical way means that teachers care for their students' needs and they try to adjust to their different wants, abilities and needs. The words ethical learning imply that both ethics and learning are in focus and that they together, at the best, create a unit.

When ethics and learning become ethical learning I think that *learning from the Other* is a basis, and I have found a lot of learning from each other in these meetings in the classroom in the study. Lévinas (1969) describes learning from the Other as openness for the Other, which means to stay open for the Other's abilities and be a learner oneself. This suggests that when two subjects, you and I, are in a relationship with each other there are opportunities for this openness and chance for learning.

It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I ... this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation is ... an ethical relation...this conversation is a teaching [enseignement]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain (Lévinas, 1969, p. 51).

This quotation stresses that when we learn from each other, we are in an ethical relation and that we as individuals gain more if we stay open and learn from each other, than if we only learn isolated from other people. Paulo Freire (1970) calls this openness a 'true dialogue' where both parties speak and both parties listen. Arguably, I suggest that learning is interaction. Of course we learn individually also, but maybe learning in for example meetings with Others in the classroom are more effective and can lead to a deeper understanding and life-long learning? One of the students in this study expresses the importance of real-life meetings in school when she writes: 'You really need these kinds of meetings' (Caroline, reflective journal).

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