

Editorial 2016:2

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Editorial Nordidactica 2016:2:

Does the future of subject didactics look darker than its past?

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We would like to believe that in the Nordic countries and the German-speaking world subject didactics (ämnesdidaktik, fagdidaktik, Sachdidaktik) appears intelligible as a conceptual category and legitimate as a field of scientific enquiry to many, or most, of our colleagues in the faculties of education and the faculties of humanities and social sciences. As to where the specialists of subject didactics are located, there are also in the Nordic countries various organisational and institutional solutions. In some cases subject didactics specialists are mostly found in the faculties of pedagogy or teacher education, in some other they are likely to be in the faculties of humanities and social sciences, depending on their disciplinary background.

These different solutions have both advantages and disadvantages. In the first, there are probably better opportunities to integrative collaboration between specialists of subject didactics of different subjects, and also educational sciences may provide a congenial environment for theoretical, conceptual and empirical work within subject didactics. However in that institutional framework it is also possible that educational sciences, including educational psychology, set the premises to relevant research on teaching and education in such ways that it relegates subject didactics to the margins of educational research and calls it into question as a useful conceptual category. In cases where subject didactics is located in the faculties of 'substance disciplines', it may be easier for a subject didactics specialist to speak the same language and share interests regarding research topics with colleagues. On the other hand, distance from the world of education and teaching is likely to grow and the opportunities to cross boundaries between different subjects' didactics may be few.

Which of these two solutions may work better is surely dependent on wider historical, institutional and cultural framework factors that are specific to each country, and even to each university. Why we think it is nevertheless important to raise this point about different institutional solutions is that if it appears that subject didactics could benefit more from some other arrangement than the existing one, it is worthwhile to sit down and discuss the alternatives seriously.

It seems to us that in the Nordic countries subject didactics is perhaps not going quite as well as it has in the recent past. We think of examples where all the more weight in teacher education is being put on general didactics and educational psychology, and subject didactics is being seen as narrow and parochial by colleagues

in educational sciences. The ideas of ‘21st century skills’, with emphasis on students’ competences and pedagogies for ‘learning to learn’, have increased the gap between general and subject didactics. Yet we believe that ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young et al. 2014), or more specifically, ‘powerful disciplinary knowledge’ (Lambert, Solem & Tani 2015) must be hinged upon solid disciplinary conceptual foundations. This entails that in school there needs to be subjects, and in teacher education there needs to be subject didactics.

Under these circumstances it is as important as ever to sustain communities of subject didactics, like the journal *Nordidactica* and the Nordic NoFa conferences. We urge our readers to contribute to these shared activities and to continue waving the flag of subject didactics in all appropriate – why not also inappropriate – contexts!

This issue is a fine example of several challenges – but also opportunities – that discipline-based education and its didactic research encounter in the Nordic context. It offers interesting examples of the ways in which education of humanities and social sciences can be explored. The issue starts with Jon Magne Vestøl’s article ‘*On teaching what cannot be said*’. He discusses the ways in which religious education can address themes that transcend the limits of verbal communication. The empirical data collected from young Norwegian members of the Catholic and Lutheran churches describe difficulties that the students were facing when describing experiential aspects of their religion in the classroom context. Vestøl’s article emphasises the need of constructing tasks, guidelines and evaluation criteria that can enhance mutual understanding and respect to others.

Also the second article of this issue comes from the Norwegian context. Alexandre Dessingué examines how the concept of cultural heritage is defined and used in the curricula of three school subjects: Norwegian language, Religious Studies and Ethics, and Social Sciences. Dessingué analyses objectives and described learning outcomes of these three subjects and raises central questions on critical literacy and awareness and complex understandings of identity.

The third article takes us to the Swedish context: Per Eliasson and Kenneth Nordgren ask ‘*What are the conditions for intercultural history teaching in the Swedish compulsory school?*’ The article is based on the quantitative survey on teachers’ thinking about the subject of History and its conditions. Eliasson and Nordgren show how tension could be observed between the traditions of the subject and the external pressures. For example, teachers saw empathy and critical thinking important in principle, but these ideas were not necessarily implemented in their actual work. Based on this research, more efforts to support teachers in dealing with intercultural perspectives would be needed.

The fourth article examines recent changes in the Finnish comprehensive school curriculum from the viewpoint of geography. Markus Hilander investigates the blurred concept of geo-media that has been implemented in the new curricula for both lower and secondary geography. By analysing the answers of geography teachers and academic geography experts Hilander shows that there is no consensus of the essence of this concept. He analyses three images that could be used in enhancing young people’s skills to interpret and critically evaluate visual re-presentations. With the

literature review, Hilander broadens up the idea of geo-media from digital media towards all media that carry geographical information.

We take this opportunity to thank our readers and colleagues for the two years when we have had the privilege of being the editors of Nordidactica!

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