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Colour and form

Changing expressions of vocational knowing within floristry education

Abstract

This article investigates how expressions of vocational knowing regarding colour and form changed in Swedish upper secondary floristry education between 1990 and 2015. An analytical approach is used which falls within the framework of a sociocultural interpretation of educational activity. During the period studied, subject matter related to colour and form became increasingly formalised. Empirical data was obtained from multiple sources, including two interviews with an experienced senior teacher, which helped to reveal the local history of a leading Swedish floristry school. The findings of the article are as follows: (i) conceptualisation, verbal analysis and reflection have gained prominence in Swedish floristry education since the 1990s, and (ii) these tools have increasingly served to help participants in education make and express aesthetic judgements. Through a discussion of various aspects of contemporary Swedish floristry education, the article illuminates the complexity of long-term changes in vocational knowing.

Keywords: Conceptualisation, floristry, vocational knowing, aesthetic judgment, professionalism

Introduction

This articleⁱ explores floristry education in Sweden over the period 1990 to 2015, with a focus on pedagogic content related to colour and form. The findings presented are based on interviews with an experienced senior teacher. In the context of floristry handicrafts, traditional colour knowing differs from, for example, art education, because the material already has a given colour. Since 1966, colour knowing has been acknowledged as a subject in Swedish floristry educationⁱⁱ. Based on the available teaching materials at the upper secondary schoolⁱⁱⁱ in focus in this article, it seems that content regarding colour and form was previously less formalised. Hence, it appears that colour knowing has recently attained a more central position in floristry education. However, regarding its formal role, as described in policy documents, colour knowing has now been incorporated into the overarching domain of composition (Skolverket, 2011).^{iv}

Although conceptualisation, which is ‘the capacity to integrate diverse forms of information in active reasoning’, is a characteristic human trait (Keller & Keller, 1996, p. 130), Swedish vocational education research suggests an increased emphasis on the required analytical capabilities and the ensuing conceptualisation^v of the production process (Berner, 1989; Lindberg, 2003). According to Filliettaz (2014), numerous sociolinguists note that ‘the historical evolution of work itself has established increased demands regarding language use and communication skills’ (p. 227), especially in the service sector. Hence, the seemingly changing role of colour knowing within Swedish floristry education probably relates to this conceptualisation process. It is likely that other handicraft vocations have experienced similar changes. Furthermore, in a primarily oral culture—which, to some extent, was the case in Swedish floristry teaching before the 1990s—there is not much attention given to ‘preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus’ (Ong, 2002, p. 43). Nevertheless,

aesthetic judgment as such—based on our ability to perceive with our senses—was integral to floristry knowing, even before conceptualisation, although its forms have changed.

The backdrop of the current study is that floristry craft is seldom the subject of research, and floristry education is even less so (Gåfväls, 2015). However, from a more overarching perspective, scholars have explored the historic evolution of the culture surrounding flowers—albeit with a focus on the flower trade itself—from ancient times (e.g. Goody, 1993) to the contemporary mass market (Riisgaard, 2009; Ziegler, 2007). In Sweden, the first formal floristry education school was founded in 1944 (Gårlin & Carlsson-Ring, 1995). It has since evolved in tandem with reforms, trends and the number of applicants for floristry training (Gåfväls, 2016).

It has been shown that the process of teacher professionalisation influenced education (Englund & Solbrekke, 2015; Dahl, 2016; Sjöberg, 2010) in the Nordics and elsewhere during the period under study in this article. However, instead of primarily focusing on changes to policy and documents, the current research argues for the need to start with a focus on what has occurred in the classroom and during the local school history. From this perspective, the quality of teaching—and thereby the professionalism (Englund & Solbrekke, 2015)—of teachers becomes central, rather than professionalisation, which focuses on autonomy, authority, status and legitimacy. One description of educational professionalism is ‘the ability to reflect on one’s own practice in a distanced, interpretive manner’ (Grunder, 2016, p. 157). This ability is often appropriated in higher education, which is often considered a prerequisite for professions and professional work (e.g. Englund & Solbrekke, 2015). More specifically, Kvernbekk (2000) discusses how theoretical knowledge enables ‘professional practitioners to see more’ (p. 358). In practice, the conceptualisation process is linked to how students are assisted by the models of language in use in specific professional situations when learning how to appropriate words and other signs in their vocations (e.g. Gee, 2008, p. 94).

Internationally, increased academisation and regulation has accompanied the continuous growth in the body of research. For example, arts-based research has achieved a more prominent position over time, as seen in arts education (e.g. Willmoth, 2016). This process has had consequences for the validation of education and research (Schroeder, 2015, p. 36). The abovementioned process of academisation, notably of practice-based education, has also occurred in Sweden—in textile teacher education, for example (Holmberg, 2009). Overall, questions raised within arts education, arts-based research and floristry education have points of intersection. One example is interpretation, conceptual stance and interaction with objects and materials (Dyrssen, 2015). Similarly, in music education, the educators’ professional understanding is a vital concept (Angelo, 2016). The present study explores how local school practices determine specific subject matters (e.g. Lindberg, 2007) and how *ways of knowing* (Carlgren, 2015) are influenced by changes in expression within the curriculum and syllabus (Carlgren, Forsberg & Lindberg, 2009), thereby exploring subject-specific language. The form, format and content of pedagogic texts and teaching materials has changed over time (Trotzig, 1998), thereby—through changes in wording—describing ‘the invisible text’. The perspective chosen here is based on a relational view of knowing and on specific teaching traditions (Carlgren, Forsberg & Lindberg, 2009). The analytical approach is based on a sociocultural interpretation of educational activity in which human actions and materiality are interpreted as being socially situated and created by time and space (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2010; Wertsch, 1998); it therefore focuses on linguistic practice, as explained by Lave and Wenger (1991):

Thus the didactic use of language, not itself the discourse of practice, creates a new form of practice, which has an existence of its own. Legitimate peripheral participation in such linguistic

practice is a form of learning, but does not imply that newcomers learn the actual practice the language is supposed to be about. (p. 108)

Based on the research discussed above, the following research question was developed to guide the work in the present article: *How has the way of expressing vocational knowing about colour and form changed in Swedish floristry education since the 1990s?*

Method and Data

The data used for this article consist of two in-depth interviews and a wide range of artefacts, including local teaching material from a time period corresponding to the focus of the study, as well as more than 30 hours of participant observation at the school in question. I have considered the language in use to comprise context, participation and history, and I have adopted a similar stance towards the collection of data (e.g. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews were held with the same teacher over a period of approximately one year. To convey the findings, I have identified two themes which are central to the teacher's story about the changes in colour and form knowing in education, by considering the local setting as the starting point and using supporting prerequisites, when required, to make specific interpretations from the transcripts (e.g. Griswold, Magione & McDonnell, 2013).

The analytical process covers three consecutive steps. The first step was data production and the transcription of the interviews. In parallel, participant observation and an examination of the different artefacts and teaching materials accessible at the school took place in an *ad hoc* manner. The second step of the analytical process was the forming of categories and themes. One example involved a comparison of stories told and the history of the school. The comparison placed a special focus on the role of colour and form as an example of the changes which have occurred over time during the period of interest. In the third and final step, the themes and categories created were subject to critical questions and deeper analysis.

There are several reasons for selecting this particular school (Gåfväls, 2016) and teacher and for selecting the examples used in this article. Notably, when the school was founded, it was the first of its kind in Sweden and remained so until the 1970s. Hence, this particular school has highly influenced Swedish floristry education, ranging from the curriculum to the aesthetic characteristics. The teacher who was interviewed, Anne Lindgren, was a student at the school during the late 1970s. At the time of the interviews, she had worked for more than 25 years at the school.

I described the local history of the school (e.g. Lindberg, 2006) by transcribing the audio recordings, so that a fuller account of the events was obtained than what the literal transcripts were capable of displaying, thereby conveying a picture of the school's history. Nonetheless, the process includes an element of construction of the local history of the school (e.g. Lindberg, 2006). Pauses, laughter, small words and utterances were removed, while context and interpunctuation were added to the voice in the transcripts, which were translated from Swedish to English.

The empirical case is organised into two parts, (i) and (ii), to improve the understanding of the changes in the curriculum^{vi}. The first part concerns the increasing importance of theory, conceptualisation, verbal analysis and reflection. The second part addresses how conceptualisation and the use of theory have increasingly provided tools for participants to acquire aesthetic judgement skills and knowledge beyond their personal tastes and/or traditions. The findings are reported in the same order as they were revealed in the interviews, and they are framed in boxes to increase readability (e.g. Berthén, 2007; Lather & Smithies, 1997).

Findings

(i) Increasing importance of conceptualisation, verbal analysis and reflection

Overall, at the time of the interviews (2014–2015), conceptualisation had become a central aspect of both contemporary floristry education and its everyday linguistic practice. Nonetheless, as explained by the interviewed teacher, traditional floristry knowing about colour, as still taught around 1990, was different. For example, only a few decades back, the average bouquet contained stronger contrast and fewer nuances, based on elaborate models which were then commonly used. Currently, the increase in the variety of material enables florists to compose and shape nuances to reflect a richer variety. In other words, the content of vocational knowing, as defined in contemporary Swedish floristry education, is subject to change.

During the time that Anne Lindgren had worked at the school, she had experienced an increased intellectualisation of the floristry subject matter as well as two major reforms in Swedish upper secondary school education. The first reform occurred in 1993 and the second in 2011. Lindgren described the first of the two reforms as ‘ground-breaking’ for upper secondary floristry education, since it broadened the content such that it no longer focused purely on the floristry vocation but also provided the schooling required for university admittance. As a result, there was an increase in the number of applications in upper secondary school floristry education^{vii}. Lindgren described the second reform (2011) as the termination of students who automatically qualify for university admittance while simultaneously being a sort of continuation of the first reform of the 1990s; the difference was that it gave students even more time for the vocational subject matter. Lindgren also stated that the prolongation of the educational trajectory helped to augment graduating students’ vocational knowing, especially after the 2011 reform. Meanwhile, reflections on the working process became mandatory within the subject matter, and the use of conceptualisation increased considerably.

When I was a student, decorations looked a certain way. The education was formed based on specific models, and, as compared to now, the traditional way to do things was present in a more pronounced idea about where the specific flowers were to be placed. The feeling for colour and form was present in the education, even if it was not explained in words. The students’ gut feeling was always right, even if they were not able to put words to why they thought a certain decoration was either ugly or attractive. That is something that the students know in a very different way today. In floristry education, what has changed most is the use of what I would call theory. There was essentially no spoken analysis in use when I was a student. We had some theory—*some*—but you did not have the language back then. You talked about other things, such as visual balance, and you must not forget that the teacher’s opinion always represented, in a sense, what was right or not. You were never encouraged to question or really discuss. The teacher said what ought to be changed and asked rhetorically: *Can you see?* And as a student, you answered, *Yes*. But the question *Why?* was never there, even if the intuitive feeling was. There were fewer words for different parts of the composition when I was a student. It was more like, flowers were foliage or containers—that was it. If you added some foliage, then you had created a composition inspired by nature. Yes, it is true! Before you said anything, you were asked leading questions. That was before we as teachers had worked out what conversations could contribute with. Back then you could say: *The top flower is a bit too high. Can you see?* But nowadays, we want students to say what they see and then have a dialogue to help them analyse the design. However, the crucial question we have to ask is *Is it really getting much better?*

Anne Lindgren recalled her own education, stating that there have been changes regarding how floral design is taught, which can be noted visually in decorations as well as in the customary ways of talking about them. Even if theory existed when Lindgren was a student, there have been major changes in the conceptualisation of students’ vocational knowing. As a consequence of changes in the ways in which questions are asked, ‘Why?’ has gained greater

focus. Intuition is still important in education, but verbalised language now has more importance. Thus, students are expected not only to convey what Lindgren describes as a ‘gut feeling’ but also to explain and argue using reflection. When Lindgren used the term ‘gut feeling’, she also suggested that students previously did not have much experience of conceptualisation to which they could refer. However, creating a specific decoration has always been related to intellectual processes in the sense that the florist must know, albeit tacitly, certain things in order to create the design in question.

Regarding Lindgren’s statement that the use of theory—which can be considered part of the overall conceptualisation—has undergone the most change, there is the question of how the practice in floristry education has changed in more general terms, particularly in comparison to changes which have occurred directly in vocational colour knowing. It is clear that students of today face a different situation, wherein they gain more direct access to materials and tools for verbalising their vocational knowing. Nonetheless, in terms of colours, the theory as applied within floristry differs from that used to mix colours, for example, in oil paintings or digital work, since flowers normally have a given colour, and each given unit cannot easily be changed, due to its original materiality. Therefore, knowing about colour can again be said to have evolved from a tacit or hidden aspect of teaching content—where it probably also had a different meaning—to a pronounced area of floristry vocational knowing. Using James Paul Gee’s (2008) terminology, floristry has transformed from an ‘in the head’ approach to knowledge and learning (p. 94) to an approach which involves the increasingly frequent use of conceptualisation.

(ii) Change of tools for honing aesthetic skills

In the 1980s, there were fewer varieties of flowers available, and the tradition regarding how to combine them was much stricter. It would never have been possible to do a decoration in purple and red, for example. You simply would not have done it, since it was contrary to the colour knowing and thinking of that time. But today, it is super cool to trace colours and say they go well together, even if the flowers, in themselves, have their limitations. For example, there are few grey flowers, even if it is fashionable, and now there has been a trend of using big flowers and creating a kind of blooming expression. It becomes more colourful, in a way. Then, we have the shabby-chic trend, which has had a big influence with all of its soft pink colours—the flower arrangements become beautiful! Nevertheless, the longer students participate in education, the more they express an appreciation of all the different colours. In the beginning, they might say, *Oh, I just want pink roses*, or *I just want this and that*. But last week, we only worked with white colours, and the students had the opportunity to experience that white is not just white. During the week, they discovered flowers for what they really are and had the possibility of seeing flowers beyond their personal opinion and taste, contrary to the situation if you were a student in the 1980s. In that sense, today, theory is a resource when teaching. It can be used to get outside of one’s own taste. It can be a way of learning how to analyse and get some distance. Some might say, *I do not like turquoise*, but when they are digging deeper and starting to see nuances and analogies that harmonise, by combining different materials, then they see the possibility of learning to appreciate new things. After a while in education, you no longer hear *I do not like this colour* or *I think this is awful*—you simply do not hear it any more.

The changing aesthetic judgment of participants in floristry education is considered to be more than just a passing trend. However, verbal analysis is also a tool which can be used to trace colours, through which potential combinations can be planned and thought out in advance without being attempted in practice. By incorporating reflection and other elements of conceptualisation into her teaching, Lindgren believed that she gave students the opportunity to gain perspective on their personal taste, while she also enabled them to appropriate, over time, a linguistic practice involving colours and nuances which went beyond their personal taste. Hence, conceptualisation, verbal analysis and reflection provide tools for *seeing* and *imagining* potential actions with materials.

An important theme is how flowers have a kind of inherent limitation, insofar as the colour is given beforehand, due to the flowers' materiality. This is to say that the meaning of a colour cannot be separated from the object it is the colour of (Van Leeuwen, 2014, p. 398). Traditionally, the teacher decides which specific flowers are supposed to be used as teaching material. However, the activation of reflection brings analysis into play. In practice, these factors are in line with the contemporary pedagogical and political ideals featured in the Swedish national curriculum for upper secondary education^{viii}. Under the present circumstances, referring to a 'gut feeling' does not seem to pay off, although this may formerly have been the case. Knowing how (e.g. Ryle, 1949) to conceptualise and verbalise the play of colours, which remains unchanged in pure sensory terms when compared to ancient times, stands out as a central component—and change—in floristry. In other words, it appears that conceptualisation increasingly serves as a tool which provides perspective on both personal taste and the floristry tradition. During the time span covered by this study, education has become less about doing as instructed (i.e. according to a model). As a result, the knowing about colour and form has changed not only in terms of content but also in terms of their roles when applied; that is, this knowing has shifted from a relatively strict model to a more flexible tool involving conceptualisation and therefore enabling diverse expression. This is to say that previously, colour and form were both part of a single joint entity—the flower—and therefore were not considered separately to any great extent. The model of previous days was, so to speak, all-encompassing, and students did as they were told. But both colour and form have come more into focus and under greater scrutiny in recent years, due to the focus on conceptualisation. Verbal language also plays a more important role today than it did at the beginning of the studied period. Taken together, these features of the development of Swedish floristry education imply that the abovementioned tools have increasingly served to help participants make and express aesthetic judgements.

Discussion

As previously stated, a language practice is appropriated over time and under changing conditions, in line with a sociocultural interpretation of educational activity (e.g. Carlgren, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2010; Wertsch, 1998). In the past, in the teaching of practice, aesthetic judgments about colour and form have shifted from being relatively tacit, in the sense that they reside implicitly within models, to being more verbalised and outright, based on the analytical reasoning used in teaching. This development is parallel to the professionalisation (e.g. Buyruk, 2014; Dahl, 2016) of floristry teaching during the studied period. As mentioned earlier, floristry education now places an increased emphasis on analytical capabilities and conceptualisation (e.g. Berner, 1989; Lindberg, 2003). The specific forms of social interaction in education also have an influence on the teaching content as well as on language development (e.g. Gee, 2008). Over time, students' voices have thereby acquired a different role and place in relation to the changing subject matter. Through the conceptualisation, the 'gut feeling' is given a less prominent role and is replaced by a more distanced analysis in both teaching and student participation. The way that knowing about colour and form is applied at the floristry school can thereby be said to challenge earlier ideals and to move teaching and linguistic practice in a direction other than the historical practice of students directly reproducing teachers' presumed (personal/traditional) ideals. Thus, the subject matter of floristry teaching can be said to have shifted towards reflection, conceptualisation and a verbalised analysis of floral design, which together serve as tools for aesthetic judgment. In turn, the use of language in teaching has a more central role, which also alters the subject matter (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991). The conceptualisation and increased use of language also occurs in tandem with an increased use of communication in writing.

Similar processes have occurred in education in general as well as in specific areas, such as arts education. In the latter context, Gunn (2009) stresses the situated aspects and the tendency towards critical writing now being valued as part of the validation in fine arts teaching (p. 117). The author refers to how art students actively ask for lectures in history and theory, even though they say they want to become artists, illustrating an overarching theorisation process. In contrast, Dyrssen (2015) points to how those working in the field in professional roles often draw on the artists' experience, professional expertise and creative ability.

The current research is about development in school; what has occurred in the floristry vocation during the studied period is beyond its scope. When vocations experience a change from an oral to a literate culture as a consequence of curricular change, the result is 'theorisation' (Lindberg, 2003, p. 86–87). In terms of content, this can be described as an abstraction which challenges the dichotomy between theory and practice. Indeed, the construction of the curriculum and syllabus is a tool which can be used to change school practices, even if it seems that the main determinant of (vocational) school practice remains the vocational practice.

The traditional way of learning a craft, such as the floristry handicraft, is through hands-on practice with limited conceptualisation. One implication of this is that vocational knowing is currently highly subject to change, due to the simple fact that teaching—under the influences of contemporary political and pedagogical ideals—changes students' understanding of the skills required for competent practitioners of the craft in question. In turn, this very process alters the perceived professionalism of practitioners, both in terms of content and how it is expressed.

I have used the term 'conceptualisation' (e.g. Young, 2006) to indicate that the 'ways of knowing' (Carlgren, 2015) might change simply through the very process of wording, which always to some extent includes an element of translation and thus of distortion. Again, it is illuminating to compare the present situation with that of less literal cultural traditions and vocations. Ong (2002) theorises about oral culture as follows:

Trades were learned by apprenticeship (as they still largely are even in high technology cultures), which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation. (p. 42)

Moreover, since the question is not only one of conceptualisation through spoken language but is also, to a large extent, one of conceptualisation in writing, it has, in turn, potentially even more profound implications:

Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. (Ong, 2002, p. 45)

Concluding Remarks

The research question which has guided this article — *How has the way of expressing vocational knowing about colour and form changed in Swedish floristry education since the 1990s?* — has been answered. The answers obtained can be summarised as follows. The way of expressing vocational knowing about colour and form in Swedish floristry education has changed since the 1990s, primarily through an increase in the amount and importance of conceptualisation. In particular, conceptualisation, verbal analysis and reflection have evolved into frequently used tools for making and expressing aesthetic judgments about floral design. In this process of change from model to tool, a new linguistic practice has formed.

It is interesting to note that it is not clear whether the changes in the expression of situated vocational knowing described above have led to any improvement or deterioration in

the quality of the handicraft. In the words of Anne Lindgren, ‘*Is it really getting much better?*’. There seems to be a belief that language, in itself, leads to more democratic and individualised education, which is presumed to entail higher quality. Traces of pedagogical and political ideals are discernible in this line of reasoning as well as in the policy documents referenced earlier in this study. The current educational system does not encourage imitation of either teachers or models. Instead, more emphasis is placed on analysing actions and expressing one’s thoughts about them. This reflective process is a language game (Wittgenstein, 1992) of its own, which some are more apt to adopt than others. Through this process, abstraction and distant reflections have become important to the vocational knowing of Swedish handicrafts. It would be interesting to examine in more detail whether this intellectualisation of traditionally tacit handicraft knowing has any impact—positive or negative—on students’ ability to acquire the schooling required for university admittance. This is particularly interesting given that much conceptualisation currently occurs in the form of writing. Nonetheless, it is possible that increased intellectualisation and distancing may not affect handicraft quality.

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ⁱ The original version of this article formed part of my doctoral thesis, defended on 21 September 2016 at Stockholm University. The article included in the thesis was a longer version which had previously been submitted to FormAkademisk, and it is available in a total of five print copies in Swedish libraries. The current article has been shortened and substantially altered, in line with the editor's requests. The omitted parts of the original article will form the basis for a second article.

ⁱⁱ Swedish national curriculum 'Läroplan nr 11:43, Dnr 105/66', found in the archives of the school in question.

ⁱⁱⁱ Currently (i.e. as of 2016), Swedish upper secondary school is divided into two streams: vocational programmes/apprenticeship education and higher education preparatory programmes. The national curriculum differs for each of these two streams, as do admission requirements (Skolverket, 2016). For more extensive information about the organisation of the Swedish educational system, please refer to Skolverket (2016).

^{iv} The Swedish National Agency for Education ('Skolverket') displays an awareness of the fast-moving nature of vocational knowing (e.g. Skolverket, 2004).

^v Use of the term 'conceptualisation' (e.g. Young, 2006) rather than 'verbalisation' or 'vocalisation' to express the wording (oral or written) captures the potential change to the phenomenon being studied. It is a question of more than phrasing. The process could be performative in itself.

^{vi} The handicraft programme curriculum following the most recent Swedish upper secondary school reform, in 2011, states that students ‘should get to develop their feeling for colour, form and composition’ (Skolverket, 2012, p. 119). Similar expressions appear as so-called core content in the syllabus of two of the six mandatory courses in the handicraft programme. In the *Handicraft introduction* course, core content is described as ‘knowledge of theory of colour and form, and capability to use it during the creative process’. It is expressed slightly differently in the orientation course *Floristry I* as ‘theory of colour and form in basic floral arrangements’ (Skolverket, 2011). Once a student has taken these two mandatory courses, the ‘theory of colour and form’ disappears entirely from the formally stipulated curriculum. It seems reasonable to assume, when analysing the content of the handicraft curriculum, that in practice, colour and form are then subsumed into the so-called ‘composition theory’ which appears as part of the syllabus in later courses in floristry education (Skolverket, 2016). For a more comprehensive account of the Swedish handicraft programme prior to 2011, please refer to Lindberg (2006).

^{vii} Data from the database of the Swedish National Agency for Education (‘Skolverket’).

^{viii} The curriculum is available on the website of the Swedish National Agency for Education (‘Skolverket’). <http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=2975>