

SCHOOLS IN SRINAGAR (KASHMIR) 2014: SEARCHING FOR TRUST FRAMED IN A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract The article presents a small piece of research, namely the observation of teaching and learning in the classroom, and students of various grades from kindergarten to post-graduate. Almost half of the article is a critique/discussion of the observation as method, social-semiotics as tools and presentation of indicators of trust in close relationships. *Indicators* of trust/confidence is safer to talk about than to claim that one has proven trust. The five sections of critique/discussion have gotten almost as much space as the sections on actual empirical data. A portion of the article is therefore a meta-text, text about the text that follows (the empiric part). In terms of social semiotics, both separate and complex utterances to document indicators of trust are used. There are expressions/utterances that show relationships, teamwork, respect, responsibility, honesty, openness, and more. These are factors that tell something about the quality of *reciprocity* between pupils/students and teachers. Positive reciprocity is important building blocks for a great *atmosphere*, and both reciprocity and atmosphere are compelling indicator of confidence.

Keywords: trust, indicators of trust, social-semiotic perspective, reciprocity

Introduction

The article is based on a primary and a secondary source. The secondary source is the general experiences when working with Marie Curie project “Stimulators and inhibitors of culture of trust in educational interactions assisted by modern information and communication technology”. These experiences are from different venues from May 2013 to June 2014, i.e. classroom observations, the overall impression from the school environment, collaboration with research colleagues and further experiences related to the topic of social resources, trust, reciprocity, communication, and more. Especially useful experience has been conversations with people who represent the community in various fields in the humanities. Some of these experiences are presented in two previous articles “The face of Trust? What we talk about, when we talk about trust? A background”, Nilsen (2013), and “Trust in schools in Kaliningrad? Background - Observation – Interpretation”, Nilsen (2014).

Primary source for the article is the experiences from observations in schools and universities in the city Srinagar, India (and the capital of Jammu and Kashmir), and together with scientists from Italy, Poland and India. The formal observations are taken from regular teaching situations, and not specially adapted for a research team. The article is based on the following observation sequences:

Kindergarten/primary school (age 4/5 – 7): Six groups, 6 observation-sequences.

Primary school (age 10/11): Four groups, four observation sequences.

Primary school, higher level(age12/13 – 18): Five groups, five observation sequence.

Post-graduate, two groups, two observations.

Tight focus: Positioning/Communication

The article has straight direction due to the focus of the observations. We know that normal teaching and learning situations take place in an indefinite number of activities, large and small

actions, actions visible and less visible. To create order in the diversity of academic and social activities is focus in this study *relationships* between teacher(s) and pupils/students, specifically teachers' teaching methods and ways of positioning themselves (body language, gestures, facial expressions, etc.) and student response/positioning in relation to the teacher(s) and the social situation in general. The purpose was to observe also the interaction between pupils/students. However, any interaction here was too vague and simplistic to be used in the analysis.

Teacher(s) and pupils/student interaction and positioning constitute a diverse and complex register of expressions. To create order in the chaos of expressions (utterances), I have chosen a limited number of expressions that says something about the social climate, the atmosphere in the classroom and the mutual contact between students and teacher (s). One may suggest an atmosphere mixed of harmony and/or disharmony, proximity or distance, inclusion and/or isolation, energy or resignation, in short, an atmosphere of mutuality, confidence/trust¹, safety and closeness or the opposite – lack of mutuality and positive atmosphere or something on a continuum between those extreme points. As *indicators* of confidence/ trust the study refers to utterances and patterns of utterances between pupils/students and teacher(s). Such utterances use a broad range of communicative forms of interaction; positive interaction, however not always positive. To uncover and make meaning of the interplay composed of a cluster of utterances, the social-semiotics in the next paragraph says something about.

Social-semiotics; utterances as indicators of trust

The monologic communication model does not provide enough answers to how communication works in practice. Therefore, this model has been strongly challenged by the *dialogical*

¹ We may argue that confidence and trust are synonymous concepts. However, speaking about atmosphere, mutuality, closeness, and the like in the classroom – in fact a micro-society – I prefer to use confidence for trust, consequently from now this article uses confidence/trust (see later in this article about trust and reciprocity, too, and eventually distinction between these two)

point of view. Today we know that almost all communication take place in context, i.e. cooperation, collaboration and negotiation of meaning between one and one, between one and a group and between groups and teams, and so on. Famous names behind the dialogical view are Bakhtin (1986), Wertsch (1991) and Halliday (1978), and newer names such as Kress (2010) and van Leuven (2005), the last two referred to in Skovholt & Veum (2014, p. 27-29). We read books, poems, newspapers, journals and the like, i.e. texts mostly conveyed in familiar symbols (verbal language). More recently however, computer technology and other creative ways of communication allow for multimodal texts, i.e. communication and meaning is created by other symbols, separate symbol and cluster of symbols, i.e. sound, image, animation, facial expressions and other gestures and other utterances.

We may imagine the classroom as a social arena for interaction, and activities that are going on we may consider to be composite texts of utterances, i.e. writing, speech (monologue, dialogue and multilogue), photos, music, body language, gestures, facial expressions, and more. This multitude of utterances the social semiotics works with to understand and add meaning.

The science of social semiotics has come so far that linguists are working for a grammar, inspired from the traditional verbal language. The traditional semiotics operates with three main types of signs; *symbol*, *icon* (analog text) and *index*. Symbols represent our verbal language, icon is picture of the actual object and index is indicator(s) of a phenomenon(s) (an incident, a meaning, a purpose, an emotion, and more (Løvland, 2014, p.1 and Skovholt and Veum, 2014, p. 27-28).

In observational processes are relevant to use all three forms of utterances. What concerns verbal language we know best what is the code of meanings, analogue text is less relevant in this study. Index is very appropriate, i.e. interpreting relationships between signs and significance of characters: smile, sincerity, other facial expressions, body language (positioning/attitude), other forms of interaction between teacher(s) and pupils/students (closeness, honesty, spontaneous or calculating expressions, confidence versus ambivalence, and more. In my article from observations in Kaliningrad autumn 2013 (2014, in print) , both form and content of the observations are similar

to observations in Srinagar. To point out indicators of confidence/trust from Kaliningrad, I set up the following main categories; the school as learning arena, the classroom and the classroom atmosphere, communication and mutual communication (reciprocity), and some other values. In the study from Srinagar one will recognize these indicators. But the new point now is to emphasize the social-semiotics as a formal tool to “speak” about indicators of confidence/trust². The social-semiotic includes a complex web of utterances. This fact strengthens the need to say something about observation as research-method.

Short about observation as method

The aim of the study is to collect data, to interpret and describe a limited phenomenon, namely what is the connection between classroom-activities and (mental) safety; culture of confidence/trust, a complicated interplay neither easy to describe nor easy to justify. The overall goal is holistic understanding seeing social interaction and connections as different from fragmentary actions. The approach of data collection and personal based, subjective perspective of interpretation interfere with the validation and reliability of results. The subjective perspective is enhanced by the mode of observation where “open” observation was used rather than a pre-prepared observation form (observation-blank). However, in this instance open observation – however focused – is preferred because classroom activities change continually, and one activity influences other contemporary activities. Concerning subjectivity of observation and interpretation, one distinguishes between “a low inference descriptors”, i.e. description of observed behavior on which it is easy for independent observers to agree or disagree, and “high inference descriptors”, i.e. description of observed behavior not easy for independent observers to control or agree or disagree with (Nunan 1992, p. 60). This current study is clearly based on “high inference descriptors”. Therefore the study does not present “heavy” conclusions, but is meant to prepare and motivate for more detailed studies in the same or related fields.

²Preferring confidence for trust, see note 1) here

Distinctions in the concept of trust?

When do we finish? The article “Trust and reciprocity: A theoretical distinction of the sources of social capital” (Torche and Valenzuela, 2011) presents an interesting contribution about two forms of social capital – *reciprocity* and *trust*.

*Reciprocity is the type of social capital embedded within personal relations, triply (...) by co-presence, reciprocity and memory, respectively. Trust is the type of social capital embedded within relations with strangers, defines by the condition of impersonality or anonymity (p.181).*³

The authors emphasize that “reciprocity is by definition particularistic while trust has a universalistic potential” (ibid.). In my article from observations in schools in Kaliningrad (2014, in print), I present talks with people who all have close relations to the concept of trust. They point out that trust is something that must be built in close relations, – “trust is not, but must be built as a silent negotiation between one and one, one and a group, between group and groups – confidence meansto *believe in*” (Svilosen). Rector Konow relates trust to own school culture, saying; “confidence must be built..., signals are transparency and openness, these ethical principles work well between teachers and students”, rector underlines⁴. “Openness and reciprocity run through our school as such and between those who populate the institution”, Konow ends. The student Tomas (KVN) associates trust to close relationships, “trust means mutual respect, mutual respect is the best proof of confidence”, Thomas concludes.

Let us sum up: People referred to above mean that trust is not something that exist “per se”, but must be built as reciprocity between people in close relationships. The article “Trust and reciprocity: (...)” is even clearer here and suggest to *replace* the concept trust (presuppose in close relations) with the concept reciprocity. My article, in addition, expands these two concepts with one more distinction, *confidence*. A final remark about the concept of trust and cultural differences. Utterances – both verbal and non-verbal – probably represent different meanings in the same contexts. One must

³*Reciprocity* and *trust*: in italic by me.

⁴Note in this context that both of my conversation partners use «confidence» for trust, cf. footnote 1.

mention that in our project SIT, five nationalities are involved. A smile, an emotional movement of hands, arms, etc., body language, a touch, mix of verbal utterances may have different meanings in different countries. Meanings of human behavior in different cultures are discussed in an article in The MAGAZIN, *Dagbladet*, 12. July-2014⁵.

Empiri

The first object of observations

The material here is taken from children in various activities, all in all six groups, age four/five to seven years. The formal activities were language learning (English and mother tongue), training on computer (computer games) and free activities (music, dance, play) in a large group of different ages. First a reservation concerning the use of the term “trust”. Children at this age do not know the word trust, and therefore they do not know (in a way) what trust is. Maybe they do not know the term confidence either nor the term security, but we believe children have a clear *sense/feeling of security or insecurity*. And, I suggest, one must read into a child’s world of feelings that security constitutes confidence/trust (see footnote 1). Now, straight to the observations:

- School – a learning arena: The group situations were characterized by friendliness and freedom, yet distinct structure and order, and the many teacher-inspired activities seemed targeted and filled with small parts of knowledge, new ideas and inspiration, i.e. energy for learning.

- Teacher positioned him-herself in the role of classroom-*regissør* (eng. director) with kindness, inspiration and with an indisputable “I like you”, and the teacher got in return positive feedback from the children’s smiles, laughter, hands and arms and other body language, song, joy, mimicry, all in all a collection of collective expressions that communicated “we like us”, and probably “we like you”. The closeness of the interaction and reciprocity – that applied to both content and form – can be encoded in the concept of confident and energetic atmosphere. The close, harmonic atmosphere was particularly noticeable in physical activities (music, dance,

other movements) with different age groups and adult together, i.e. harmonization of differences. And teachers positioned themselves as indisputably positive, stimulating role models.

- The overall impression from the collective class and group structures was balance between order and freedom. Controlled freedom worked to guarantee safe atmosphere. Controlled freedom, I believe, offered also guarantee for a sense of “we” that has a lot in common; song, rhythm, memorization, repetition, energy and teacher in the position of both authority and inspiration and responsible for orchestration of the class community. The “we”-atmosphere was less evident in a group where four-five year olds practiced individually and with great freedom with computer games. Teacher’s role and positioning was here less clear – passive acceptance may be is the right characteristics. However, indistinct activity and feedback (close interaction) between teacher and pupils does not mean the absence of security. In any case, I interpreted the children’s behavior (facial expressions, body language, *habitus* in general) as ordinary harmonic and confident.

- The classrooms where we met classes and groups of children had a positive image: bright walls, pupils placed in pairs or four or six in groups around tables and walls decorated with drawings and posters referring positive “slogans”, life-wisdom, etc.. Especially the library had a “learning-friendly” atmosphere. Positive atmosphere there was, also, in a large, open common room where students from different ages and teachers were actors together. Photos reveal the good atmosphere here better than words, sorry I do not put the photos here.

- All in all I registered in *these* age groups energy for learning and additional activities, and – not to forget – indicators of confidence. In this picture one can interpret confidence on two different levels; confidence to teacher, and good feelings to the classroom (and school) as a place to be and a place to learn.

The second object of observations

The material in this part is taken from pupils in primary school, four groups (age 10/11), subjects mathematics, social sciences, English and mother tongue. Age 10-11 years is a stage between childhood and youth. Maybe 10-11 years old children know what it means “to rely on” (Norwegian; “stole på”), but we are safe to use the concept confidence.

⁵*Dagbladet*, national newspaper.

- The school, a place to learn. The four observations – each observation about 30-40 minutes – revealed clearly that the school is an arena for learning. The close, teacher-inspired and teacher-inviting atmosphere from observation in the early stages were now replaced by more serious and less visible joy, less visible inspiration and “we”-commonness. This change must be understood in relation to the teacher’s positioning, the teacher’s response to what the school community, parents and students *expect*. The teachers turned up with clearer authority, serious body language, less transparency and less inviting gestures and posture in general. The atmosphere signaled sincerity, order and structure and dissemination of knowledge, including here implicit knowledge (doxa) about the relationship between teacher and students; *I’m here for you, school is a place to learn.*

-The relationships. The students’ reactions to the a-symmetrical – however not rejecting – relationship between them and the teacher seemed to be *tacit acceptance*. As an observer I initiated two different interpretations of such an attitude(1). The students ‘sensed’ that school is important for their future, and the teacher’s role is to manage and disseminate knowledge to realize their promising prospects. In this perspective they rely on the teacher (with silence), and accept positioning themselves mostly as passive recipients⁶. The classroom is an atmosphere of order, not visible and especially friendly atmosphere, but (by all means) not unkind. The clearest observation and interpretation are the students’ (seemingly) respect for the teacher, it may include mutual respect (2). Alternative interpretation is that students’ tacit acceptance symbolizes feeling of distance to the teacher and general powerlessness in relation to an authoritarian institution (in which the teacher is represented). However, for me, this last mentioned interpretation falls, because: The atmosphere was calm, harmonic more than disharmonic, teacher positioned her-/himself neutral participating, and the relationship between teacher and students seemed to be mutual accept, but – as indicated above – not observable “we”-oriented. On a continuum

⁶ Note! «passive» in this context refers to what one can observe from outside. What is going on inside (reflection, feelings, approval, being opposed to, etc) I do not take stand on.

from security to insecurity, the security and confidence are most likely. Silent state of confidence/trust, in other words not readily observable, we may add.

The third object of observations

The material is drawn from primary school, higher level and two groups post graduate.

- The observations of these groups have a content similar to the content in the “Second observation”. As a general impression the classroom atmosphere seemed *not* particularly inspiring; it concerns furniture, and it concerns sparse lighting and cold rooms. Students were placed in rows, boys and girls separated, and in some cases boys and girls were organized in separate classes. This was, from my perspective, a strange distinction, but anyway, I do not know what the gender segregation means for our observation of confidence/ trust. Within the cultural context we may presume that gender segregation is rooted in the philosophy of religion, and works well for the learning outcome and for the classroom atmosphere as such. The teacher(s) positioning his-/herself as clear authority and in the role of being disseminators of knowledge. The relationship between students and teacher seemed to be mutual respect and mutual acceptance; *I’m here for you, you know and are confident that I am useful and necessary for you.* However, there was a certain difference from the group of 10-11 years old students. These older students (mostly boys) initiated and expanded the relation to the teacher by comments, by address questions and sometimes the students took initiative to discussion. Open student participation represents a certain sense of freedom and security in the situation as such, and concretized in the student – teacher relations. Students’ own free will also reveals self-confidence, one should not underestimate this form of confidence. I will emphasize that students’ initiative was not dominant, but clear enough as an exception to the norm which also, at this stage, was teacher-dominance and one-way communication from teacher to the students. In two out of the six observations the teacher positioned himself in a more free form, allowing the students to practice and try out new knowledge (experiential learning), and teacher in the role of supporter and supervisor. In this pattern of reciprocity we may interpret both freedom and freedom with responsibility,

and that is, in my opinion, a situation that testifies (at least) a certain capital or dimension of mutual confidence/trust.

Conclusion

The social-semiotics has not yet any finished grammar, accordingly the signs and the cluster of signs are problematic interpretation object. The book *Literature Criticism* (Hagen 2004) discusses the concept of *quality* and in particular how difficult it is to determine literary quality in a novel, a poem, etc. The author concludes that one is most safe to speak about *symptoms* on quality. I think we have similar problem to explain and define the concept of trust; what is trust, and how do we scientifically prove the concept? When working with observations in Srinagar I found of interest the article "Trust and reciprocity" writing about the relationship between the concepts of "reciprocity" and "trust" (see above "Distinction in the concept of trust"). The observations in this study is about people in close relationships, and reciprocity is the platform in observations and in interpretation as well. And reciprocity works ultimately as the basis for confidence/trust. I also borrowed from literary criticism (above), and as an alternative

to 'prove' confidence, I use *indicators* of confidence/trust. Cluster of indicators representing classroom atmosphere. Key indicators are classroom organization, teacher and pupils'/students' mutual communication and ways to position themselves through an arsenal of verbal and non-verbal expressions. For children aged four/five to seven there was, convincingly clear, to detect indicators of closeness and positive reciprocity, i.e. confidence. The highly visible, close relations pupils – teacher(s) were noticeably less visible in classes at the intermediate stage. But seriously, respect and mutual respect can also indicate confidence, but the indicators are less convincing. Students at higher stages also showed willingness to come forward with their own opinions and invite for discussion. Expressions in these situations requires courage, it requires personal confidence and probably more or less confidence to the situation.

I must admit weaknesses connected to the observational material, the sessions of observation were all too short. This also applied to observations from schools in Kaliningrad 2013. I consider therefore both of these studies as pilot projects that call for in-depth studies.

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