



## **'Seeing-as' in the School Context**

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SILWA CLAEISSON

*University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

### **ABSTRACT**

*'Seeing-as' in the school context is suggested as complementary to the customary planning of teaching in advance. Seeing-as has to do with a lived agreement between teacher and pupils. It can simply frame an activity or be very specific. Teachers can use seeing-as in their own way in today's classrooms where teaching seems more than ever to do with sensitivity, interaction and a willingness to play. To agree on seeing-as in the school context has to do with teachers' openness for dialogue and the concept of tact.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A teacher and the pupils in her class spent time outdoors once a week, most often in the wood nearby the school. In an observation study I followed this teacher and her class. The very first day of my observation I met them at the schoolyard and they were dressed in raincoats, boots and all of them had rucksacks. We were walking from the school and into the wood as, all of a sudden, the children stopped. They started to take off their rucksacks and hang them on different branches on one special tree. When I asked what they were doing they looked at me with astonishment and then declared that this was the 'rucksack tree'. Later I was told that the children had proposed to their teacher to have one certain tree for their rucksacks and as the teacher thought it was a good idea they searched for a tree with many branches. In the end this very tree was chosen to be their special rucksack tree. They were all regarding this tree in this certain way – but for me, at first, it was just one out of hundreds of trees in that wood.

This kind of lived agreement between the teacher and her pupils is here called 'seeing-as'. The aim of this article is to describe a particular aspect of teachers' experience, seeing-as, which has to do with a lived agreement between teachers and their pupils in today's classrooms. Seeing-as is about what teachers and pupils can create together. It has to do with fantasy and imagination of both teachers and pupils and the meeting point of their creativeness. It is a kind of unspoken process through which a person becomes enchanted, empowered and inspired (Willis, 2008). The analysis in this paper was inspired by Max van Manen's (1988) concept of the tact of teaching (the meaning of pedagogy) and the broader field of phenomenology (the study of human consciousness or the 'life-world'). However, seeing-as is here limited specifically to the school context.

## SEEING-AS ACCORDING TO LATOUR AND WITTGENSTEIN

There are concepts both inside and outside phenomenology which are referred to as 'seeing-as'. For example, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was originally developed within the sociology of science by Bruno Latour (1987). The rejection of the traditional distinction between the realm of the social on the one hand and the realm of nature and the technical on the other hand formed the basic assumption of ANT. Latour claimed that the social and the technical are inseparable and should be treated symmetrically. Within an ANT perspective, both humans and non-humans can be conceptualized as actors (or actants). The concept of 'inscription' refers to the way patterns are incorporated and encoded in objects (Akrich & Latour, 1991). Designers inscribe a program of action into the product they create. However, the subsequent use of an object or service is not necessarily in the way it was designed to be used. This is referred to as 'translation' as users interpret, modify, reconstruct and renegotiate the object or service to make it fit within their own context. They regard the object as something. The ANT concept is used to describe what can emerge for one single person but it does not have to be communicated to other persons (Habib & Wittek, 2007). This is the opposite of the way seeing-as is regarded in this article, within a pedagogical framework.

The concept of seeing-as was also used by Wittgenstein (Fitzgerald, 2009; Tilghman, 2008). He distinguished between seeing and seeing-as. Seeing-as is referred to seeing a thing in different ways. The possibility of being aware that one might see something as one thing one moment and as something else the next, has much in common with what is here called seeing-as. However, here seeing-as is specifically connected to school contexts and it is above all meant to be a tool for learning and teaching. Seeing-as is here always created on a group level (such as the teacher and the class together) and so inspired by phenomenological theory. So, even if there are similarities between translation in ANT and in seeing-as pointed out by Wittgenstein, there are also important differences.

## HOW TEACHERS ARE SUPPOSED TO ACT

Years ago, each period in school was planned, usually week-by-week, but planning was also most important before each lesson. Nearly every minute was supposed to be planned in advance as regards to what the teacher should say and what kind of questions should be put to the pupils during each lesson (Strömqvist, 1998). In the 1970s schools turned into a more *cognitivist* or *constructivist* era (Steffe & Gale, 1995; Terhart, 2003) and 'pupils' thinking' was in focus. Later, teachers' and pupils' reflection came into consideration (Schön, 1993) together with the socio-cultural focus (Wenger & Snyder, 2002; Wertsch, 1998). Some tools developed for teaching and learning in congruence with this were diary writing and different sorts of logbooks. Accordingly, inside most classrooms teachers will address one pupil at a time, asking them things like 'What do you want to learn?' or, as they speak, 'What do you think?' (Claesson, 1999). The Swedish Government argues that teachers are supposed to be professional enough to conduct teaching and to know about teaching methods suitable for a variety of situations and for each of their pupils (Englund, 2005;

Werler & Claesson, 2007). So today, as a teacher, one does not find out how to conduct teaching simply by reading the curriculum document. Teachers of yesterday were supposed to follow special rules. Teachers of today have to work hard partly because there are few tools and rules to follow in their new work circumstances.

## PHENOMENOLOGY AND TEACHING

To be able to understand the teaching of today I have spent time inside classrooms and talked to teachers and their pupils. To be there is to be in a complex environment, which makes it necessary to have a theoretical ground suited for this purpose, and this is where inspiration from phenomenology comes in (Claesson 1999, 2004; van Manen, 1988).

To use phenomenology in the tradition of Merleau-Ponty (1996/1962) and Heidegger (1993/1922), 'life-world' is foregrounded. Husserl (1972) was the first to define the concept of 'life-world' (Bengtsson, 1999). From a life-world perspective, life and world are understood to be an intertwined unit. Body and mind are also totally intertwined; you *are* your body which means that neither you can transcend the body nor the life-world (Thøgersen, 2004). Another important standpoint in this life-world tradition is that, as a human, we live in a pre-reflexive (natural) attitude towards the world, which means that we take things for granted. These things, natural as well as cultural, always show themselves to each of us as something; they are not neutral. For example, this means that a school building present itself as a school building, not as a neutral building, and not, for example, as a shop, a bank or a church.

However, general life-world phenomenological constructs are not further refined for relevance when applied to the unique phenomena in a particular study (as in this instance of teaching-as). Within empirical phenomenological research, therefore, general phenomenological ontology (theories about the nature of being) may be too extensive in scope and too complicated to apply throughout the research process. For this reason *thinking* phenomenologically while *doing* phenomenology forms the basis of the research process (Berndtsson & Claesson *et al.*, 2007; van Manen, 2002, 2003). In order to explain the study of teachers' lived experience in empirical research some aspects of life-world phenomenology are now further developed; namely the notions of intersubjectivity and intentionality.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1996/1962) we exist as a lived body, and this body is not an object like all other objects but rather an expression. As humans we always direct ourselves towards someone or something in a certain way and this has to do with our *intentionality*. Intentionality gives meaning to our actions. *Intersubjectivity* is an important aspect of teaching. Each human being is intertwined in the existence of other human beings in the culture so that other peoples' way of acting towards things around us influence us as humans. People exist only as people which means that we do not experience them the same way as objects, for example, which in turn means that someone *is* not in his face, but his face expresses a human existence. Other people exist the same way I do myself and have a certain style, certain ways of acting in certain situations. From a person's style I can tell who she or he is. Schütz (1967) argues that we regard some people who we do not know, like for example police officers, as if they have a certain style although we do not know them in

person. Teachers can sometimes talk about their pupils in stereotypes; for example, those pupils 'who talk all the time', 'who always are late' or those who are 'weak learners'.

Heidegger (1993/1922), in particular, has pointed out that we always regard objects surrounding us as something, as tools. If we look at something which we have not seen before, we give meaning to it by seeing it as something we already know; we are using our pre-understanding (Ricœur, 1985). We use the pen almost without knowing that we do. It is in the moment when it does not work (as a pen) that we really look at it, and try to understand how it works. This means that our natural attitude breaks when things do not work the way we presuppose. Also a certain context gives things certain meaning. A glass with red liquid standing in a science classroom might belong to an experiment and one would not drink it; but the same glass found in a bar might be considered to be a fancy drink.

There are a few researchers in the tradition of phenomenology who have written about aspects of intersubjectivity; for example Burbules (1993) in his book *Dialogue in Teaching*. He emphasizes that there are many different ways of having a dialogue inside classrooms and that some of them are more favourable than others. For example, he writes about the face-to-face interaction as favourable. This face-to-face-interaction might be difficult to accomplish, as the issue of the power of the teacher in school contexts cannot be ignored: can pupils ever speak out freely inside a classroom?

Just as my existence together with other people is anchored in my body and the style of my existence is tied to my intentions, so too the child is open to the world and anchors the experience of someone else in the openness to other people's intentions. Teaching is something you can never do on your own: the intentions of the teacher are recognised by the pupils, while the intentions of the pupils are recognised by the teacher.

Teachers direct themselves towards something or someone as they are inside the classroom. In this study, the concept of 'direct awareness' or 'direct oneself' is used in order to emphasize the tension between bodily-situated actions and conceptions (Claesson, 2004, 2007).

## **AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TWO TEACHERS**

In this empirical study, two Swedish teachers were observed inside or outside their classrooms together with their pupils. Both were observed from morning to afternoon for nearly two weeks each. Notes were taken, transcribed and shown to the teachers the day after they were written. They, as well as their colleagues and some of their pupils, were also interviewed. One teacher was male and one female. The observed teachers taught different age groups.

The reason there was a focus on observations and not on interviews in these studies, was that the teachers said one thing about their teaching as they spoke freely for a couple of hours in interviews – but once they were in their classrooms together with their pupils, it was not easy to observe things they had been talking about. It wasn't that the teachers were lying. From a phenomenological point of view one can understand this difference by focusing on the different contexts. In the classroom, the walls are 'talking to the teachers' demanding them to act the same way they are used to do. Also, the pupils are involved in their way of reacting: 'act as you are used to doing or we will be

confused'. It means that teachers have dreams about how to teach and what they want to do and they express that in interviews. The vision of the teacher must be kept alive and the vision has to do with the intertwined unit of what the pupils shall learn and how they are going to learn.

In the introduction to this article, an example of seeing-as in the school context was given. In order to understand the lived agreement between teacher and pupils in a deeper way, two more examples will be given. The examples are presented in order to give a flavour of what happens depending on whether the teacher can use seeing-as to the pupils' advantage or not.

### **Erika**

Erika is a middle-aged teacher and she is teaching children between six and nine years of age. The very first day I arrived to her school I was a little late and Erika was already standing together with the children at the schoolyard. The pupils were standing, two by two, hand in hand in a line, and all of them had warm clothes and rucksacks. Erika told me to join and I held a small boy by my hand as we went away. As we went to the wood Erika and all the children were casually and happily singing a song about the pleasure of walking. It was later, as we had arrived in the wood, that the children hung their rucksacks on the 'rucksack tree'. We stayed in the wood for about an hour and Erika told her pupils to try to find two objects each, which they could bring back with them to school. Later, when all the pupils had eaten what they had brought with them in their rucksacks and found some things each to bring back to school, we returned, holding hands again, and we were all singing another song.

Later, inside the classroom, the children were writing about the things they had found. I was sitting together with some of the pupils regarding what they were doing and sometimes trying to help. I was looking around in the classroom: bookshelves, a sofa, desks and chairs, tables, a whiteboard and a big trampoline. I wondered to myself whether the children ever used to jump on that trampoline during lessons. When talking to Erika earlier that day in the wood she had told me that children of today get too little exercise. Perhaps they were permitted to jump during lessons? A girl sitting by my side held up her hand showing that she wanted Erika to come to her place. Erika arrived and the girl said that she had finished her writing. Erika told the girl that she could put the paper on the stage. The stage? I could not see any stage. The girl went to the trampoline and put her paper there. A little later a boy wanted to present what he had been writing to the rest of the class. 'Please stand on the stage so that everybody can see you', Erika said. The boy stood on the trampoline reading and as he did I realised that I was the only person in that room who regarded the stage as a trampoline. From the start of the term, some recreation leaders who made use of the classroom during late afternoons put the trampoline in the classroom. Erika and the children in her class had discussed what to do with it during the daytime and came to the decision that a stage was needed.

When I had been in the classroom for about a week I felt I was living in the film called *The Sound of Music*. I found out that in Erika's classroom there was a song for every activity, and often for the moments between the activities too. Like the very first day I met Erika and her class and we went to the wood we had been singing and we had been singing on our way back as well. The songs were framing our days inside and outside the classroom and those songs

flavoured each activity. The pupils themselves wrote the songs and Erika helped them with the melody as she was a skilful guitar and keyboard player. The songs made the pupils focus on what they were doing.

Seeing-as has to do with this lived life, with the agreement between the children and Erika to use particular elements in order to work certain things out. The songs made up by the children flavoured the atmosphere. Erika, together with the children in her class, looks at things as something; for example, the trampoline as a stage. And one special tree in the wood was seen as the rucksack tree. This agreement between teacher and pupils made the work in school go smoothly and easily. Erika was intuitively aware of the power of seeing-as.

### **Jarl**

Jarl is teaching at college level. His teaching subjects are history and religion. As I interviewed and observed him I realised that he was extremely occupied by his subjects and his awareness was not at all towards seeing-as. As I entered the classroom for an early morning lesson I could see that the office cleaner had not put the chairs down from the desks after tidying the room. The boys and girls took their chairs as far from the teacher's desk as possible and they kept their coats on, as it was rather cold inside the classroom that day. Jarl stood behind the teacher's desk with his arms folded across his chest. Jarl's folded arms, standing behind and not in front of the teacher's desk, the chairs on the tables, and the coats wrapped round the pupils, formed 'walls' dividing the teacher from the pupils. The concept of seeing-as was invisible to Jarl. To Jarl the classroom was an arena for teaching and learning where nothing but what he was telling the pupils was of interest. To his pupils it was another kind of arena. And there were few meeting points.

In connection with my visits and observations of the teachers, they could read my protocols. This meant that Jarl could read about himself in this observation, which made new dimensions of teaching visible to him. He started to think about what to do in order to change things and we had many discussions about what actually happened in his classroom, from his point of view, from the pupils' point of view and from my point of view.

### **DISCUSSION**

Here a notion, strongly inspired by the phenomenological movement, has appeared. It has a focus on lived teaching and on an every-day perspective. The notion of seeing-as is not planning; as it is defined here, it cannot be at all planned. Instead, seeing-as has to do with lived agreements between the teacher and her pupils, an agreement inside or outside the classroom. In a certain situation they agree that it is possible to see a certain thing as something. As mentioned, it is possible to point out similar ways of regarding seeing-as; for example, following Latour or Wittgenstein. But in trying to understand the context of learning and teaching in schools, it seems as if those concepts are developed for answering different kind of questions; importantly, they have a different theoretical background and they focus on different kinds of realities. In contrast, it seems as if the phenomenological movement opens up possibilities to develop seeing-as further in school contexts where the lived meaning of pupils and teachers are in focus.

What teachers learned during the positivist era was most of all to plan and to follow that plan in the classroom. However, often something happened which wasn't planned and in that moment many teachers felt unsettled, because they could not do what was planned. Also, during that time, pupils had almost no influence on their own learning because they had to do as they were told. Interaction with their teachers, initiated by the pupils, was often considered as boisterous. Because seeing-as emerges out of mutual agreement where the pupils' will is involved, one could hardly expect to find it during that time. From the cognitivist era, however, teachers learned to ask their pupils how they were thinking and teachers tried to take their pupils' conceptions into consideration. During this time there was an embryo of seeing-as in the classroom because of the teachers' interest in pupils' conceptions. Later, teachers also learned about the importance of reflection and they could use reflection as a tool for thinking *on* action. In the classroom, teachers, for example, used portfolios in order to make the pupils reflect on their learning. From the socio-cultural movement writing came into focus, especially diaries and logbooks. Also things changed a lot in society as a whole and with democracy in focus. Together all those movements have opened up a new dimension concerning the relation between teachers and their pupils. Today, there is a space in classrooms that permits teachers and their pupils to develop seeing-as because the work inside classrooms has changed – from teacher planned actions to an arena where many different unplanned things can happen. What kind of preparation are teachers given to encounter this kind of situation? Is it enough to know about, for example, diaries, portfolios and open-ended questions – or is there an additional qualitatively different dimension required?

Life-world phenomenology, together with the concepts of intersubjectivity and intentionality has made one qualitatively new dimension visibly in focus in connection to a study of Swedish teachers inside classrooms. One has to consider the life-world of the classroom as taken for granted by teachers as well as pupils. If the spirit of the classroom is one of openness and creativeness new ideas easily surface. Once the teacher and the pupils look upon the trampoline as a stage it *is* a stage – this new dimension is taken for granted by all involved. Also, to be aware of the notion of seeing-as, it is necessarily to focus on the intersubjective dimension of teaching and learning. The lived intersubjective dimension between teacher and pupils makes it possible to transform the trampoline into a stage.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have identified some aspects of the everyday life of two teachers in order to give a hint of what seeing-as in teacher's everyday work might be like. Many of the old tools from the time of positivism are no longer good enough for the interactions of today and many teachers have not yet found out how to conduct themselves in this new work environment. They are aware of each pupil and some of the differences in their pupils' ways of learning and they try to help them. But they have not got just one pupil – they also have to deal with the class as a group. In this situation the concept of seeing-as might be helpful, as it has not only to do with the interaction between the teacher and one pupil, it is an agreement on the level of the class.

Seeing-as isn't planning, as it can't be at all planned, it has to do with lived agreements. All involved have to agree that it is possible to see a certain thing *as* something. It can frame the activity, as the songs do in Erika's classroom, or be very specific *as*, for example, the rucksack tree or the stage. Seeing-as is sustainable. It will remain whether teachers plan their lessons or not; as soon as the teacher meets her pupils it will arise anew in the context where it was invented. Teaching is an activity which needs one's attention in each moment in a lived classroom. Successful teachers, like Erika, are using seeing-as as tools for making the everyday classroom life exciting, easy and attractive. Seeing-as has to do with fantasy and perhaps also intuition. Young people of today are used to different worlds as 'lives', such as chat rooms on the web and different kinds of reality shows. To imagine things is seldom hard for them. On the other hand, for teachers who aren't aware of fantasy in the context of the classroom, seeing-as could be a hindrance, as it was for Jarl.

In today's classrooms with today's pupils, the character of good teaching seems more than ever, to have to do with sensitivity, interaction and willingness to play. This change hasn't only to do with a new focus on each individual in the classroom – it has to do with the way teachers exist in their classrooms. It has to do with their awareness and that the circumstances of their teaching are certainly different from years ago. There has to be some kind of agreement on this different nature of teaching if it is going to work out well. The focus has shifted to a special kind of attention and this attention includes teachers' lived knowledge. It has to do with the interlacing of body and soul; material and spiritual dimensions in the lived world. The attention of seeing-as has to do with teachers' openness for dialogue (Burbules, 1993). Also, it has to do with ethical dimensions, which is evident in the concept of tact (van Manen, 1988). In the lived life of the classroom, Swedish teachers of today often are aware of cultural and ideological dimensions of their pupils. Cultural and ideological dimensions are aspects of tact. And pedagogical tact is an aspect of seeing-as.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SILWA CLAESSION  
*University of Gothenburg, Sweden*



Silwa Claesson was originally a teacher for 16 years in Swedish primary schools. For the last 20 years she has been involved in teacher education.

She completed her PhD in 1999, which was supervised by Professor Ference Marton.

Since 2005 she has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Her research interests have to do with what happens between teachers and pupils inside classrooms. She has conducted many observation studies in different kinds of schools and in classrooms in prisons.

Email: [silwa.claesson@ped.gu.se](mailto:silwa.claesson@ped.gu.se)