

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Teaching in Higher Education: A personal account seen through a perspective of “otherness” at a Swedish University

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This study is based on personal experiences. It adopts an auto ethnographic approach and action research perspective in an attempt to describe and reflect on my experience as a teacher in a University where I have worked for just over a year; the study also examines factors that have helped me in my role as a teacher to effect change in my praxis. The paper also addresses the challenges facing higher education teachers in general (with particular reference to a teacher with a foreign background) in a western university setting. Although the study does not arrive at any specific conclusions, which was not the intention either, the reflective account and recognition of the *problem* revolving around the teaching process and the day to day interaction with students as well as the staff, is of paramount importance in its own right. I begin with my personal life in connection with teaching and learning. I have focused on my own feelings, thoughts and emotions, and have used what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I have lived through and I am currently experiencing at a Swedish university. It is a reflective approach to the issue of improving teaching: What does it take to improve teaching while enduring the feeling of “otherness”? How does one evaluate and arrange for the improvement of teaching in order to bring about student learning? For me this personal narrative is about moral work and ethical practice. As the problems of teachers are shared with other teachers elsewhere or in the same school, my reflexivity and personal narrative may benefit others in a similar situation. Our lives are particular but they also are typical and generalizable, since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions. Some readers may well identify with this situation or know others who do.

**Key Words:** Teaching in higher education, “Otherness”, reflexivity and personal narrative, auto-ethnography, personal account and action research.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the modalities and settings of learning and teaching differ, both exist in every human society and cultural group, past and present. That which could more appropriately be referred to as ‘socialisation’—cultivating humanity— has intrigued philosophers, educators and historians alike throughout history. Teaching may occur formally or informally for long or short periods depending on a society’s needs. Traditional teaching has been teacher-centred and authoritarian and not seriously questioned until recently. Teaching in higher education has become a particular subject of serious research and debate during the past several decades. Much of this research has concluded that higher education has failed in achieving an optimal level of student learning, subject matter understanding and student satisfaction. Teaching

has also failed to a degree in economic terms, i.e. less ‘product’ for the ‘investment’ (Ramsden, 2002; Bowden and Marton, 1998).

As a novice teacher I personally reacted to the researchers’ concerns and wanted to reflect critically on my teaching. I would like to effect positive changes to improve the efficiency of student learning, learning satisfaction and evaluation. I am motivated to change the somewhat negative picture portrayed in some of the research literature. I am a novice teacher but having been a student for more than three decades I feel I can differentiate between an effective teacher and a poor teacher— from the perspective of a student! Now as a teacher, I am not sure if I am reaching my students, despite the best of intentions, awareness of the problem

and desire to facilitate their learning processes. I am curious to know to what extent my own experiences as a student in the most traditional classroom settings (undemocratic and sterile) are unconsciously guiding my own approach to teaching.

Teaching never appealed to me as a profession. In my primary school in Ethiopia, an American Peace Corp volunteer asked me what I would like to be when I grew up. I answered, "I would like to be a physician or a pilot. I would never like to be a teacher". My mother reminded me of this several weeks ago in a phone call from the other side of the world, when I told her what I am up to nowadays. There is a legitimate reason behind my answer. My early experiences with teachers were not pleasant; teachers were allowed to spank and flog students. Any slight divergence from their expectations, educational or behavioural, led to severe punishment. Students' special needs were never addressed, and conformity among students was the ideal. When teachers did not feel like whipping, they made us whip each other. The academically superior student whipped the 'inferior' student. At the age of 7, my best friend whipped me in the rear as instructed by the teacher, since my friend could better memorise the entire multiplication table by heart. In my years in higher education, physical abuse was replaced by the psychological torment such as the fear of "failing grades", "dismissal" and "grade detention/retention". This unpleasant background has not prevented me from accepting a teaching position at a Swedish University. My arm has been twisted and I find myself in a profession that has always been my last choice. I note however with amused interest, my increased satisfaction with the work, especially when I am given positive feedback from students or peers. There remains much to learn, and the saying, "my only love sprung from my only hate" may be relevant here.

My aim is to investigate and analyse my teaching style with a view to improving my students' learning. I am convinced that proper teaching is a genuine learning experience for both teacher and student. Thus the study I am proposing will include both perspectives, by employing a cocktail of methods. Its theoretical framework constitutes a sociocultural perspective.

The sociocultural approach is relevant partly because I not only want to objectify and analyse my personal sociocultural 'interests', but also see that the sociocultural research tradition emphasises in general that cognitive development (learning) is a product of interaction with others when being aware of socio-historically developed tools which mediate intellectual activity. Vygotsky and other contemporary theorists working within the socio-cultural/historical approach believed that individual development of higher mental processes cannot be understood without considering the social roots of both the tools for thinking that children are learning to use, and the social interactions that guide the children in their use (Säljö, 2000; Rogoff, 1990, 1996; De Haan, 1999;

Vygotsky, 1978). The focus is not only limited to social interaction or teacher-student interactive constellation or parent-child dyad as the locus of mind, but extends to the socio-cultural context, institutional arrangements and activities of which interaction processes both at micro and macro level are parts as essential constituents of mind.

Moreover, the diversity in styles/techniques of learning demonstrated by students from different cultural groups (Berhanu, 2001) is a factor needing closer study. Culture strongly influences how we learn, teach and communicate and it is a significant factor in shaping how students and teachers communicate in teaching and learning. These culturally sanctioned and determined ways of learning and teaching should be examined and explained in order to make teachers aware of and reflect upon what comes "naturally" to them, since what is "natural" to them may not be considered natural or even desirable to minority group students. As Basil Bernstein so memorably put it: "If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the *student*, then the culture of the *student* must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (1970; Bourne, 1997, italics mine). I totally agree with this statement. However, has any one really thought *seriously* about how a teacher belonging to a 'different cultural/ethnic group' makes his/her culture become part of the consciousness of the 'mainstream student' – from each other's perspective?

This study was motivated by the following two reasons: firstly there is a requirement to produce a text (course report) as partial fulfilment of an in-service course for the university staff I am associated with. The course is designed to equip the participants with pedagogical skills appropriate to higher education. This is also a requirement for those who aspire to associate professor status. The second main purpose is a genuine desire to document and reflect on my one year teaching and learning experience- in the form of a learning journal. Therefore the views and reflections that are detailed here are not necessarily valid now at the time of this paper's publication. Two years have elapsed since I documented this account, and naturally things change both in the way I perceive the environment and vice versa. Applicable research is currently underway and a complete account that covers several years of reflection will shortly be available.

### Specific Objectives of the Study

- To reflect on my teaching experience through a reflective-praxis approach.
- To map out my students' experience of the teaching-learning process by means of course evaluation formats.
- To identify and clarify the cultural rift, if any, between a non-Swedish instructor and a Swedish student group: this *lived experience* will be seen through the concept of "otherness".

- To identify areas in the teaching-learning process and/or student learning that need to be improved, utilising concepts from action research tradition and the views expressed by Ramsden.

My main investigatory research question revolves around the question of what is necessary to improve teaching while coping with the feeling of “otherness”.

### Research Genres: Methods and Data Collection

The data is derived from two perspectives, that of the researcher and of the subjects. The two main research genres adopted in this research are autoethnography and action research. “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural... (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Under this broad rubric of autoethnography, a number of similar approaches (methods) e.g. ethnographic short stories, personal narratives, complete-member-researcher, auto-observation, reflexive ethnography, ethnographic memoir and opportunistic research are included. Although various methodological strategies have been developed in connection with autoethnographic projects, they may be applied to other forms of qualitative research as well. ‘Action research is a term applied for a particular way of researching your own learning. It is an enquiry by the self in to the self, undertaken in company with others acting as researcher participants and critical learning partners.’ (McNiff, 2002).

As seen in Figure 1 the specific methods I have used for carrying out the study are many, ranging from one-to-one interviews, to observations of classroom activities, and other delimited areas of social interaction including the reflexive approach based on complete-member-researcher. Moreover, students in a classroom lecture have observed me while lecturing, and over 40 students were expected to complete the observation sheet/schedule prepared for this study in a “live evaluation procedure”. However, not so many students returned the schedule and the information gathered from them was not adequate by my standards. The purpose of the observation was to help students to exercise participant observation skills i.e., observing a social phenomenon while actively engaged in the normal functioning of a group. The theme of the lecture was participant observation. The course is a research method course designed for special educators. I thought this could be an opportune moment to be evaluated “live”. The schedule is prepared in such a way as to capture elements of essential constituents of ideal, effective learning and teaching experiences for both the teacher and the students.

The interview was conducted with a select group of students (based on convenience sample). The interview guide we received from the course instructors (Högskolepedagogik, 10 pts) constitutes the major part of

the interview body. The data was analysed by synthesising the two perspectives and presentation is in the form of data thematisation. Every effort has been made to preserve the anonymity of the informants.

The course literature was the main reference material. However, I incorporated my own previous readings and current materials relevant to the course.

Figure 1 below shows the theoretical and empirical flow of the study. The theoretical, methodological and operational aspects are horizontally set because all the three processes are envisaged simultaneously and concerning this study they are inextricably intertwined – they are both deductive and inductive, subjective and objective processes and products and latent and manifest. The inputs, processes and output categories are not designed in a linear manner. There is an endless cyclical process in all directions. For instance, I use my own experience at the institute (inputs) reflexively (processes) to self-reflect, look more deeply at self-other interactions and develop an understanding of my awareness – a metacognition – which results in high quality learning <sup>1</sup> (product). This product is input in its own right and the cyclical process continues connecting the personal to the cultural.

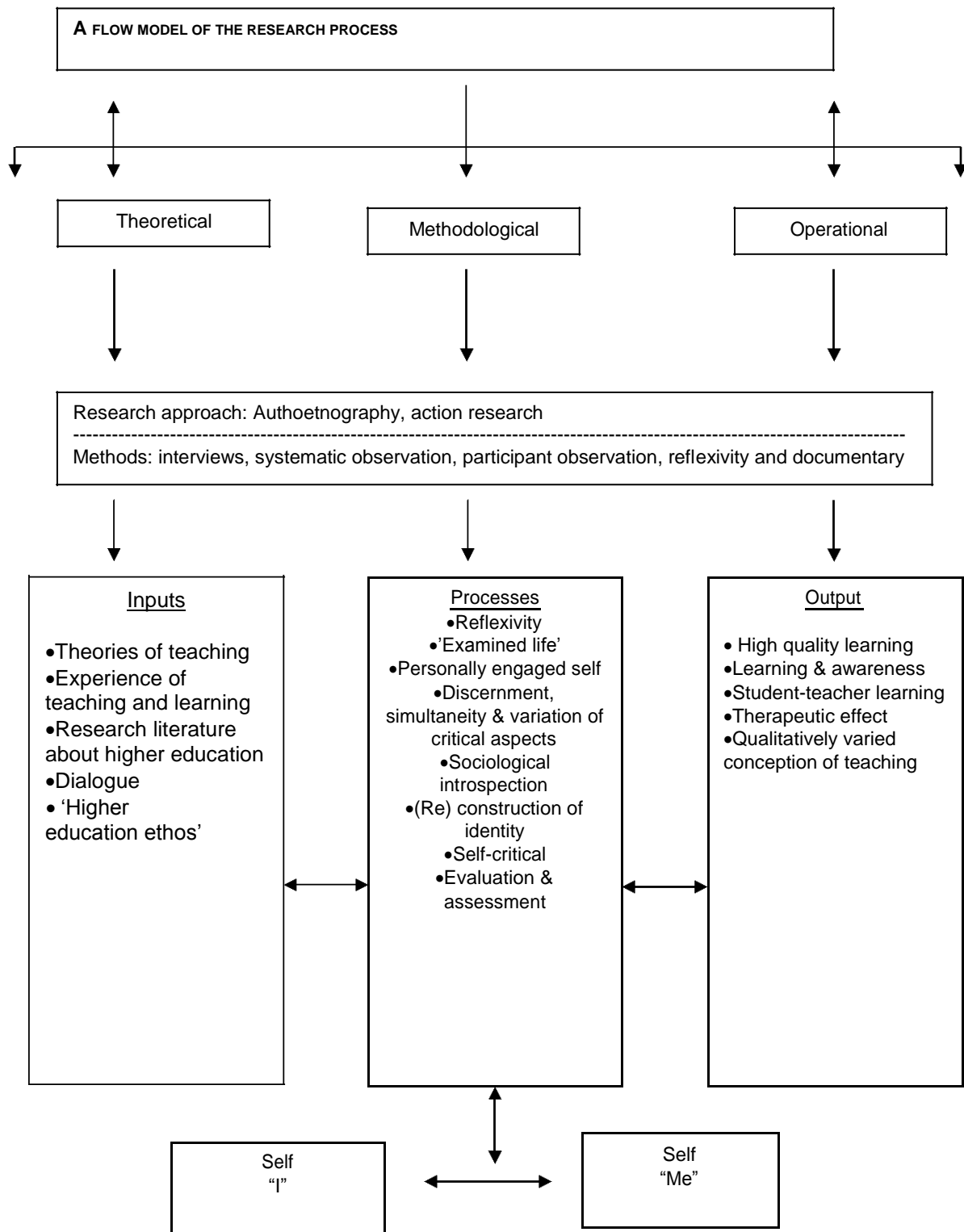
According to Mead the *self* emerges out of and is constituted by an organisation of the particular individual attitudes as well as an organisation of the social attitudes of generalised “other” or social groups as a whole to which the individual belongs. He further elaborated that “it is the social process of influencing others in a social act and then taking the attitude of the others aroused by the stimulus, and then reacting in turn to this response, which constitutes a *self*”.

The *self* is therefore in this context (in my model) the action of the “I” in harmony with the taking of the role of others in the “me”. The *self* is both “I” and the “me”; the “me” setting the situation to which the “I” responds. Both “I” and “me” are involved in the *self*, and here each supports the other. He wrote that, “the essence of the self... is cognitive”. (Mead, 1934). I disagree, however, with this statement. From my point of view, the essence of the self is both the reflective and affective aspects of a personality. The self in my model is, thus, essentially a cognitive as well as an emotional phenomenon.

### The Experience of Teaching/Learning and Assessment/Evaluation of Student/Teacher Learning

This section mainly consists of reflections on my teaching / supervision tasks in research methods oriented courses.

<sup>1</sup> According to Ramsden (1992/2000) high quality learning is defined as the learning that embraces changes in conceptions of subject content, confident facility with the subject’s syntax and methods, solid knowledge of its specific details, and a sense of ownership and delight in its practice (p. 218).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical and empirical flow of the study.

It is simply a summary of my 'learning journal' dealing with my struggle to help students develop and maintain research-focused attitudes and skills and how I, as a teacher, help to bring this about. My reflections here are in line with the action research tradition i.e., "practitioners reflecting on their practice and communicating it within a framework of research-based professionalism" (Ghaye and Wakefield, 1993; Schön, 1983). I am looking at the educational processes occurring in my own classroom, which I am trying to change and improve through action research and a reflective approach. This process is educational not only because it derives from an educational process, but also because through methodical enquiry I am moving to a more conscious understanding of my own practice as a teacher. It is also educational because the knowledge thus generated can contribute to further educational processes if it is used by other teachers in their reflections and their classroom (lecture, seminar, examination / assessment, supervision etc) practice (Professor Tony Ghaye, Personal communication?).

## Lecture

Firstly, I was not even fully aware, especially at the beginning of my work last year [2003], of the extent to which I had these processes as authentic goals / objectives [to help students develop and maintain research attitude and skills], let alone the specific strategies and methods I apply to achieve them. This is because I was and still am overwhelmed by the adjustment process of becoming a teacher, a role that I assumed barely a year ago. What I am trying to say explicitly here is that I have not been that zealous as to how the students are going to be equipped with research skills and attitude. I was fully immersed in planning the specific lectures which I was expected to give. My predominant obsession was whether the lectures would be presented in a clear, understandable and pleasant manner. This was to ensure that the students maintained constant interest. However, for most of my lecture sessions I did not sufficiently engage with the question of to what extent knowledge and skills including the 'desired attitude' have been *interiorised* and have become an embodiment of the students' cognitive map. In other words, the meta-awareness / reflection was not complete. Although on a number of occasions, such as lecture preparations, supervision and seminars, I have thought about these elements, the emotional and sensory processes (sparked by the new role I have assumed and the accompanying excitement) interfered on a regular basis inhibiting a concentrated effort to design pedagogically sound strategies to bring about student learning.

Nonetheless, I have recently noticed a change in my teaching approach partly as a result of my reading of the

literature in the 'Högskolepedagogik, 10 pts' course which I was still attending. While preparing for a lecture on "observation as a research method", I spent extra time pondering over which research examples could illustrate the concepts / methods, strategies and modalities I present to the students. I came up with a number of varied formats (e.g. observation sheet, schema, matrices, and diagram) not only from my own research but also from other educational anthropology-oriented research examples. A couple of weeks later when the students presented their assignments, I was amazed by the extent to which they had been influenced by my preparatory work. Many of the students I examined imitated or even came up with innovatively varied versions of the observation schema / matrices / diagram I showed them.

This self-reflection enables me to improve aspects of the way I see myself and improve my ability to critically analyse my own work. I was genuinely surprised to discover that it was only when I was prepared to reflect critically on my practice that I really began to learn about myself and my professional work. Working as a teacher in a [foreign] higher institution of learning and in a foreign language has, for a person belonging to a minority ethnic group, its own extra burden to deal with psychologically. I am constantly surprised and challenged by the extremes of joy and sadness, exhilaration and frustration that I experience every day.

Despite some controversies surrounding lectures as an effective teaching strategy, lecturing in higher education is still the pre-eminent method of teaching. Both proponents and detractors of lecturing have interesting arguments concerning this classical method of teaching. My limited experiences convinced me that it is how you handle it that chiefly matters and therefore determines its efficiency. Lectures can be beneficial if presented in such a way as to inspire and stimulate students, offer a room for some dialogue and have structured goals (Bligh, 1972). Ramsden (1992) rightly noted that Lectures can be a useful way to introduce a new topic and to provide an overview of the relation between topics. It *is* possible to give a traditional lecture well, to engage the audience's interest, to stimulate their thinking and their desire to find out more about the subject, to pass on knowledge to a large group, to explain phenomena at the audience's level, to select illustrations that are memorable, to restrict the amount of material contained in a single lecture, and to show respect for and sensitivity to one's students in so doing. It is a rare occurrence to see these things combined... Whether these combinations occur in every lecture or not, I am, however, aiming at and striving towards attaining these goals<sup>2</sup>. But, I am also realistic that teaching may never be perfect and that it is always a

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<sup>2</sup> As Ramsden put it every teacher can learn how to do better... the truth of the proposition that good teaching, though never easy, always strenuous, and sometimes painful, is nevertheless its own reward.

discovery process intertwined with the context and always in need of improvement. My “otherness” will probably always add a dimension to the complexity. In this vein, I know of no better statement about the nature of practical wisdom than the prayer of St. Francis where he asks God for the patience to accept the things he cannot change, the courage to change what is in his power to change and the wisdom to know the difference (Elliot, 1991)<sup>3</sup>. I think this is also in line with the principles of action research, despite its religious connotation. The self-reflection I outlined earlier about my lecturing and the comments I received from my mentor and students have increased my critical awareness through the process of *discernment, simultaneity* and *variation*.

A student reported: You are too ambitious and over zealous to tell everything you know. You bring with you a lot of overheads and explain too many concepts and principles... You are very interesting and fun... It would be good if you could learn to speak slowly. Sometimes it is difficult to catch up with you, as you are keen on covering many areas in a short period... You may need to work a little bit on your accent and pronunciation especially on your day to day language... (Sylvia).

My mentor who inspected my lecturing on three occasions made similar comments:

“Girma, you need to speak slowly, you talk too fast. You are excited. Calm down! You are competent and know your area very well but you may need to simplify a bit and offer more concrete examples to illustrate your concepts and principles. However, you should enable them to disentangle principles from examples..... Otherwise, you have the ability to create a nice social climate and engage students actively and you are to a large extent responsive to their needs...the students I talked to told me similar things, also that you are approachable...”

I have heard similar comments before. I am critically aware of the problem and am continuously making progress. As I mentioned earlier, the problem has partly to do with the excitement and nervousness that the job of lecturing entails and lack of experience of public speaking on my part. Another aspect of the problem is my lack of proficiency in Swedish. Moreover, I am very conscious of the limitations concerning my knowledge of the language, and need to deal with the problem. However, it is somewhat puzzling as to why a few students said to course leaders that “it is difficult to understand Girma” while the great majority do understand me. I presume that those few students have little experience of talking to a person whose first language is not Swedish. They are, perhaps, out of touch with the pluralist and multicultural nature of our societies. They do not realise that they should be in tune with different dialects, accents and

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<sup>3</sup> Death is always close by. And what is important is not to know if you can avoid it, but to know that you have done the most possible to realise your ideas. Frantz Fanon, Letter December, 1961.

background language of the person who speaks Swedish. I believe this is also a learning moment for them to decipher how a multilingual person for whom Swedish is a third or fourth language pronounces Swedish. Without variation there is no learning! (Bredänge, 2001; Bredänge et al. 2001).

The problem of learning a new language, however, is that you make painstaking efforts to learn the language and culture of the *host* country, as I have done in Sweden, and yet you still face other deficiencies in the way you combine the spoken language with gestures, voice intonation, modulation, timing, eye contact, degree of aggression or passivity and listening techniques, pronunciation, pitch, semantic elements, and, in general, ‘the rich aura of non-verbal communication’ that surrounds or goes along with the ‘dry language’. Another area of difficulty is to engage in extensive small talk and to understand jokes, sarcasm, and jesting and idiomatic expressions. It is not easy to learn communication skills that help to liven up discussions especially in lecture sessions. This level of language mastery leaves much to be desired on my part.

A number of students remarked that I am an entertaining, funny, a *performing type* and approachable. One male student based on “live evaluation procedure” remarked:

“You made us laugh; you are different, interesting. You have unusual form of presentation full of humility. You represent diversity and the feeling one doesn’t have to be perfect in Swedish to teach at a university level... a different perspective... (Magnus).”

Many other students who learnt to know me well through tutoring and other small group educational environments hinted that I am involved in their learning and show interest in them as people. However, the type of comment uttered by Magnus above, has bothered me a little bit because the statements do not necessarily imply that advancement of their learning has taken place. Although I am happy that the statements do not carry negative or discouraging nuances (such as sterile, lifeless etc.), I am nevertheless uncertain about the extent to which the colourful (funny) and interesting presentation guarantees effective student learning. I am not unhappy with the label “entertaining” but I need to work harder to bring about changes in students’ understanding.

The latter comments embodying aspects of emotional and humane relationships are uttered by most students. I consider this as a success. This has mainly to do with my personality which is natural and unmanipulated. In this vein, Ramsden’s views struck the chord when he said that the emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship is much more important than the traditional advice on method and techniques of lecturing would suggest. Those comments combined with my own reflections have enabled me to engage in effective action in relation to purposes and criteria which I have accepted

as my own. I call this a learning process for myself. Bowden and Marton (1998) aptly described that effective action requires an effective way of seeing: "... the most important form of learning is that which enables us to see something in the world in a different way. We see effectively when we discern the aspects of the situation critical to our acts and take them into consideration often all of them at the same time".

The example I mentioned earlier about my lecture on "observation as a research method" also illustrates the process of formation of knowledge, discernment, simultaneity and variation. In order to help the students develop the ability to "capture" observation data in certain ways, I offered them a certain pattern of variation through different observation schedules, matrices, diagrams etc. This occurred in terms of patterns of variations in the learning experience rather than in terms of teaching method. Bowden and Marton (1998) rightly remarked that when educational quality improvement is embarked on by academics, there is an understandable tendency for the focus to be on their teaching activities *per se* as I did myself in the lecture. I, like many other teachers, was concerned about improving the way I lecture, or handle small group discussions or the reliability of my assessment of student essays. Although I realised that the central issue was whether the changes made any difference to student learning, I was a bit preoccupied with the lecturing style and my own behaviour. As discussed elsewhere it is difficult to support a claim that quality has been improved if the change is simply in the teacher's behaviour with no influence on what or how well students are learning. Fortunately in my case that small change I made in my preparation (behaviour) and lecturing style has also brought about effects on their learning as demonstrated in their assignments.

It could be worthwhile to reflect over my own school life in Ethiopia, which spanned 16 years because it may still unconsciously guide me on how to deal with my teaching tasks here in Sweden<sup>4</sup>. However, as long as I critically reflect over the huge disparities between the two countries, the risk of applying traditional methods of lecturing/teaching in a Swedish context is minimal. The tertiary education system in my home country is characterised by a high level of 'power-distance culture' where the professor is "up there" and the student is "down here". The system is dominated by men; it is a male-dominated culture. The Swedish way is diametrically opposed. The casual and egalitarian manner of the professors in general is extraordinarily amazing. In addition, I have never been tutored by a woman at home. Here, I have to deal with a totally different facet or view of life.

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<sup>4</sup> I came to Sweden in the 90s as a guest research student to pursue post graduate programmes and I finished my masters' studies in 1996 and a Ph.D. programme in 2001 at the University of Gothenburg in the Department of Education and Educational Research.

I come from an educational system and a culture where students expect teachers to initiate communication (large power distance). On the contrary the standard behaviour in Sweden is that the teachers expect the students to initiate communication, take responsibility for their own learning; independence and self reliance are looked upon favourably, whereas contrasting behaviour such as dependency and helpseeking can often be viewed as a sign of immaturity. Even if I am quite aware of the cultural differences – most desirable and undesirable behaviour – I have to admit that I have yet to fully come to terms with these differences.

In the Swedish system the student can strongly challenge the instructor and in some cases he/she can be made to lose face; as a whole 'face consciousness' is weak whereas at home there is a tendency that neither the teacher nor the student should ever be made to 'lose face'. It is therefore, sometimes, difficult for me to find the balance between the two extremes. The polite and soft way of uttering views, which I am familiar with, might here be interpreted as insecurity or lack of self-confidence. In Sweden, instead, "assertiveness- the right to be yourself" *challengingness* and "rugged individualism" appear to be the idealised vision. In contrast, in Ethiopia, the boundary between self and society often appears not to exist.

Regarding lectures and class sessions, there is a big difference between the experience I had in Ethiopia and the standard in Sweden. In Ethiopia, the teaching - learning process is one in which the teacher 'showers' his/her lecture for hours with facts and then leaves the lecture hall. Here, in the Swedish schooling, culture emphasis is placed on critical reflection, group discussion and conceptual development and 'redovisning' (paper presentation), as opposed to group test or invigilation administered at the end of the term. Of course, the disparity is partly caused by economic differences.

The socialisation process of the schooling in Ethiopia is, in particular, characterised by allocation of grades to those who conform to the social order of the school. The process is both overt and hidden, and social reinforcements – praise, blame, etc. – are the driving forces in the process. The situation in Sweden is not quite different from the practices at home, but there is less emphasis on grading, labelling, and competition.

The way in which I was taught, and the manner by which I learned how to learn, is an aspect of socialisation, and different from that which the Swedish instructors expected me to possess upon entering the host institution, Pedagogen. The most important variant is the emphasis on transferring the skills and the knowledge learned to out-of- context situations in an abstract and reflective manner. For me, one of the advantages of this style of learning was that in Sweden. I was relieved of the burden of memorising, rote learning, and drilling tasks that were typical of the educational system at home. It was often the case that I did not fully grasp the concepts or techniques presented to me throughout my training at

home. This is exactly what I am currently trying to avoid when dealing with my students in the same department where I was a student myself a few years ago.

As mentioned earlier, group or co-operative culture (study), versus the competitive ethos, are also potential areas of differences in the way we learn most effectively. Compared to the Swedish school system, in Ethiopia there is a high emphasis on competition imposed by the school system, despite the co-operative nature of the culture. At each level we are compared to each other and assigned grades. Therefore, there is a tendency to give priority to the achievement of symbols rather than *real achievement*. The extent to which the Swedish school system is immune from this type of evaluation deserves close scrutiny which however is beyond the scope of this study.

### Supervision and tutoring

This part of my responsibility has afforded me ample opportunities to exercise researching skills with the students<sup>5</sup>. As is known, individual supervision is usually conducted between the supervisor and two / three students. This small group tutoring creates opportunities to digest significant steps in the research process using a number of modalities, examples and formats. The (eye) contact this small group size creates and the ease arising from it facilitate a genuine learning-teaching experience through on-the-job training. Because these students are working on their research designs and essays, there is a material basis for the development of research skills and attitudes. I would say that tutoring and supervision work have provided ideal opportunities for me to instil in the students the culture of approaching a problem in a scientific way and designing a research plan to systematically solve problems or describe a phenomena through conventional research methods. Tutoring facilitates a sense of deeper understanding of the link between theory-method and data production and analysis. Moreover, a standard way of formalia and presentation of scientific papers can be practised.

The most important aspect of tutoring is that there is ample room for dialogue. I feel comfortable with small group dialogue because it is meaningful. To engage in a meaningful dialogue with others is to understand something of the different ways in which educational knowledge (research skills/attitude) and experience can be generated, structured and conveyed through different forms of knowledge. As Freire (1990, p. 65) aptly described: "without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education".

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<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned earlier most of my teaching hours are invested in research courses that are intended to equip students with research methods.

It is probably because I took to heart the importance of dialogue that both the students and some colleagues positively evaluated my supervision/tutoring work. This is sufficiently illustrated by the following three e-mail excerpts from three students and a senior professor:

Vi upplever dina intentioner som handledare att du är engagerad och verkligen intresserad av vårt arbete. Du har en rak kommunikation och är positiv och uppmuntrande även när du påpekar brister. Det känns lätt att prata med dig och vi får ett bra bemötande. Vi har alltid fått feedback direkt när vi mailat, ofta per telefon, och det känns bra. Det känns som ett ömsesidigt givande och tagande. Vi har sett fram emot våra handledningar och det har enbart varit positiva upplevelser som stärkt oss i vårt arbete.

Vi tycker att vi har lärt oss hur en bra handledare ska vara, vi har fått en positiv modell att ta efter i egna handledningar i framtiden. Det har varit utvecklande för skrivandet att ta del av dina tankar och åsikter om vårt arbete, det har fått oss att utveckla vårt vetenskapliga tänkande.

Vi har läst var för sig och gjort anteckningar för att sedan diskutera. Vi upplever att det är litteratordiskussionerna som för oss framåt i lärandet och förståelsen. Att sedan få bolla dessa tankar med handledaren fördjupar kunskaperna. Det här är bästa strategin för oss att närma oss det textmaterial vi haft i kursen.

Man har aldrig möjlighet att påverka kursen man går eftersom man först i utvärderingen får ge sina synpunkter. Vi hoppas ändå att universitetet skulle vara flexibel om något kändes fel, i synnerhet eftersom vi läst specialpedagogik och om t ex elevflytande. (Lena och Marita)

[Our impressions of you as a tutor are that you are committed and have a real interest in our work. You have a straight-forward communication and you are positive and encouraging, even when you point out mistakes. We find it easy to talk to you, and we're treated well. We've always received feedback when we've sent mails, often by phone, which feels good. It feels like a mutual giving and taking. We've been looking forward to our sessions with our tutor and our impressions have all been positive and strengthening us in our work.

We think we've learned what a good tutor should be like; we've received a positive model to imitate when we instruct others in the future. It has been developing for our writing to take part of your thoughts and opinions about our work; it has made us develop our scientific thinking.

We've read each by ourselves, making notes to discuss afterwards. We feel it is the discussions on literature



that move us forward in the learning and understanding. To *get reactions* afterwards to these *thoughts* from the tutor deepens the knowledge. This is the best strategy to approach the written material that we've had *during* the course.

One never has the possibility to affect the course (before it was launched), since we as students only give our opinions in the evaluation [at the end of the course]. Yet, we hope that the University would be flexible if someone felt something was wrong, especially since we've studied special education and about, for example, *pupil influence* (Lena and Marita)] My translation

Jag kan säga direkt; att hade det inte varit för dig så hade jag överhuvud taget varit tveksam till att fortsätta mina studier. Jag tycker att du har varit mycket uppmuntrande och fungerat som en utmärkt vägvisare i mina studier. Handledningen har dels varit handfast; genom litteraturförslag och konkreta anvisningar hur jag ska komma vidare/utveckla tankegångar etc., dels har det varit mycket stimulerande att samtala med dig om forskningsområdet rent allmänt. Det känns som om du hyser ett äktaengagemang för det du håller på med och vill sprida det engagemanget till dina studenter. Det har du lyckats med. Du är petnoga i din kritik vad gäller det formella. Bra! Jag litar på dig till 100%... och det tror jag är en av dina intentioner; att skapa trygghet för studenterna, så att en fruktbar dialog kan komma till stånd. Du är duktig på att hålla kontakten via mail/SMS/telefon. Jag tror att det kan se väldigt olika ut hur lättillgänglig man är/vill vara som handledare. Du är lättillgänglig - både fysiskt och mentalt (Sylvia)

[I can tell you right away; if it hadn't been for you, I would have had doubts whether I should continue studying at all. I think you've been very encouraging and worked as an excellent guide in my studies. The tutoring has on the one hand been firm, through tips on literature and concrete instructions on how to develop lines of thought, etc., and at the same time it's been very stimulating to talk with you about the area of research in general. It feels like you have a genuine engagement for what you do and want to pass that engagement on to your students. You've succeeded in this. You are picky in your critique with regards to the formal stuff. Good! I trust you 100%... and I think that that is one of your intentions; to create a sense of safety for the students, so that a fruitful dialogue can take shape. You are good at keeping contact by mail/SMS/phone. I think it can look very different between different tutors how easy to reach they are/want to be. You are easy to reach – both physically and mentally. (Sylvia)] My translation

Sammanfattningsvis tror jag alltså att dina intentioner med undervisningen är att vara uppmuntrande; att vara en vägvisare och guida studenterna rätt i sina studier; att visa äkta engagemang för studenternas studier; att skapa trygghet i rummet; att försöka skapa utrymmer för dialog; att vara lättillgänglig (Lena)

[To sum it all up I believe that your intentions with the education are to be encouraging; to be a guide and lead the students right in their studies; to show genuine commitment to the studies of the students; to create a sense of safety in the room; to try to create a space for dialogue; to be easy to reach (Lena)]

A few weeks ago, a professor commented that he was happy for me because my former student has made a decision to pursue a research career. The woman's decision to continue with post graduate studies was rekindled by my positive influence, according to the senior academic.

...jag vill bara glädja dig med att jag i dag blev uppringd av en kvinna som gått spec. ped. programmet och som nu ville gå D-kursen. Hon berättade att du varit hennes handledare på C-uppsatsen och att du kommit med så mycket intressant att hon nu avsåg att satsa på forskarutbildningen. Kul va?

[I just wanted to make you happy by telling you that today I received a call from a woman that had studied the Special Education program, and now wanted to attend the D-course (an MA course). She told me you had been her tutor on her C-essay (a bachelor thesis) and that you had given so much interesting input that she now intended to pursue post-graduate studies. Fun, huh?]

These positive evaluations and comments are fortunately in accord with my self-evaluations or self-reflection on my practices with respect to supervision, advising and tutoring. These are the types of comments that sustain and inspire me to be more committed to the job.

The above statements are in line with principles for evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning. It has been finely captured by Ramsden (1992): "Our aim should be the development of a self critical, reflective academic community which constantly seeks internal and external comment on the quality of its teaching, and has the knowledge base and sense of inner security to act wisely and temperately in the light of the judgement it makes of itself" (p. 247).

## Assessment and Evaluation

A second, most important phase that affords me opportune moments to help develop, maintain and instil

'research attitude' (culture) in the course participants is the quality of assessment and examination methods. As far as I can tell, the FF I and FF II<sup>6</sup> courses are appropriately and clearly designed so that even the assessments and student evaluations are intended as a way of reporting on students' progress and as a means of helping students to develop those desired skills and attitudes discussed above. There is an enormous emphasis on feedback to students, as far as I can tell. The feedback is in their own learning and teaching materials. The requirements/guidelines on how to write essays/individual tasks and student presentation (both individual and group) are finely designed, and are effective 'controlling' mechanisms to achieve the main objectives of the special education research courses.

### **Analysing the problematic situation: What does it take to endure the feeling of "Otherness" and attain student?**

This section is mainly based on the ethnographic data and it features concrete actions, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness appearing in relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure and culture.

I agree with statements made in the research literature such as the following: "the aim of teaching is simple. It is to make student learning possible." There are two crucial factors that should be addressed here. The first is every teacher's concern as to how to improve his/her teaching and attain student learning. The second one is not every teacher's concern, but "other" teachers who struggle to be accepted and respected as any other "regular teacher". These *others* could also well be women who are traditionally an oppressed group. They could also be non-Swedes who are viewed "differently" by the majority. The burden is double both for the "other" and women. Apart from investing an enormous amount of time on developing and sharpening my techniques of instruction, teaching strategies, reflecting on goals and structure of each course I am associated with, reviewing my assessment and evaluation including accountability and educational development, I am also confronted with the process of gently/carefully introducing who "I" am as a *person* in order to create a relaxing atmosphere. Sometimes I feel an inner pressure to express and show that I am profoundly modern, profoundly moral, profoundly educated, profoundly nice etc. I think what I am trying to say here is in some sense captured by the following statement by Cornel West in "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual":

For black intellectuals, the bourgeois model of intellectual activity is problematic. On the one hand, the racist heritage – aspects of the exclusionary and

repressive effects of white academic institutions and humanistic scholarship – puts black intellectuals on the defensive: there is always the need to assert and defend the humanity of black people, including their ability and capacity to reason logically, think coherently and write lucidly. The weight of this inescapable burden for black students in the white academy has often determined the content and character of black intellectual activity. In fact, black intellectual life remains largely preoccupied with such defensiveness, with 'successful' black intellectuals often proud of their white approval and 'unsuccessful' ones usually scornful of their white rejection..." (p. 137) (see also Mac an Ghail, 1988)

The above statement was made on the basis of the American experience of race relations and racial social structure. This statement does not fully apply to the situation I am in. I usually have a tendency to transcend this kind of not uncommon phenomenon and explain individual incidents and experiences at different levels. By saying I am a race-transcending type, I do not mean that I undermine the significance of race but I refuse to be confined to it. I will later describe a few unpleasant experiences I had with students and how this student behaviour is intertwined with their level of *intellectual competence*.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been said about the fact that women have to work hard to prove themselves. The same has been said of immigrants and people who belong to minority ethnic groups. As far as I can tell no one explicitly told me that I should work harder than my other colleagues. In fact, my boss and my mentor told me on a number of occasions to take a break, relax and take care of my health. I was also told not to be too kind or generous to students. What I could infer from those comments is that they have realised I am hard working, anxious about and deeply engaged in my work and that they want to "protect" me. However, for reasons which are not really clear to me, I

<sup>7</sup> Having read the first version of this essay and in particular this specific section, a good friend of mine completely misunderstood my intention here and wrote the following remark "...Jag tror du kan skippa detta att du är svart. I Sverige är alla akademiker så stressade av tanken på att de skulle verka vara rasistiska att dom snarare överskattar någon med annorlunda hudfärg. Självklart måste många vänja sig lite, men det skulle dom behöva göra på samma sätt om den dom mötte var skelögd eller något annat avvikande." I did not blow out of proportion that I am black but how on earth should I skip that I am black. This does not only gall me but also saddens me when it comes from a 'critical friend'. I told my friend "Can you for a moment forget that you are in your 70s and a woman?" I think she sounded that she would revise her comments. Even the second statement she made is outrageous. I do not understand what she wants to imply by saying that "the Swedish academics are so stressed that they had better overestimate the competence of a person with a different colour rather than being implicated as racially biased..." I am hoping my future readers will not make similar judgements. I want readers to have the holistic picture of my intention, not atomic pictures.

<sup>6</sup> FF 1 and FF II are abbreviations for Specialpedagogiken som forskningsfält (Special Education as a Research Field).

have a feeling that I should perform my duties in an absolutely error free manner. I have a “constructed” burden of being a role model for other immigrants especially those with an underprivileged and humble origin. Also, I have to admit that I often feel that there are ‘invisible eyes’ and ‘voices’, the sources of which I don’t know, constantly reminding me, “Be absolutely correct”, “Be very good”, “Be nice” etc. Often I am in some lonesome wilderness in this “thought flight”, feeling that cosmic loneliness is my shadow.

The production of intimate memoirs such as these will provide gripping stories of how this defensiveness strikes at much of the heart of the “others” intellectual activity and creativity within “white” academic contexts. What is still puzzling me is that no matter how much I prepare myself and no matter how generous, kind and engaged I am, it is not possible to satisfy everybody. I cannot get to all of them. I have come to feel that teaching, tutoring and guiding may never be perfect. I am constantly baffled with the question of why things worked with the previous group. Why not this time with the new group? What caused the difference? Why did these students behave the way they did?

For instance, when I tutor two students who are writing a thesis together, I am often confused why one of them is resistant, illogically defensive and regards me with suspicion? In some of my lectures students talk, ask, laugh and the class ends on a high note. Sometimes the lecture session is filled with tension, passivity, anxiety and silence. Why is it that some students interrogate me and seek to ferret out whether I am capable of tutoring their thesis work and enable them to successfully pass the exam? Ramsden (1992) and Bowden and Marton (2001) wrote about effective teaching and evaluating and improving the quality of teaching (and) learning which is in line with my educational values. Effective teaching is not an easily won process. The relationship between students and teachers, between teaching and learning is not a straightforward thing. It is extremely problematic, complex, uncertain, relative and context bound. It is indeed replete with conflicts. However, these conflicts seem particularly acute for me who must also fight against and endure the low expectations that continually leads others (even myself) to question whether or not I am competent, whether I am capable of reaching teaching excellence. The answers to the above questions are as complex as anything. My judgement is that a number of factors are at work and it is enormously difficult to provide a simple picture. The context, group composition, the nature of the subject matter, the time (morning, afternoon, evening), my own mood, preparation, the background knowledge and attitude of the students etc. may well play a part.

At the beginning of the year when I had just joined the Institution, I was to tutor two students writing a thesis (C-upsats) together. One afternoon when they paid an unplanned visit to me – which was our first encounter – I

was just about to swallow antibiotics for gastric enteritis (inflammation of the stomach). I told them what medicine I took and we continued to talk about their research plan for a short while and then decided to meet up on another occasion for proper tutoring. A few hours later these students wrote a long letter to the director of studies stating that they were worried about my situation claiming that I was sick and therefore may be unable to tutor them. This “medical” and/or competence judgement was made by the students on the basis of the tablet I took on the spot and the five minute brief encounter. The problem expounded when the director of studies forwarded the letter to my boss and my boss further forwarded the electronic mail to my mentor. These three officials triangulated the information (Beach, 1997). My mentor is an extremely open and pleasant person. After listening to my explanation concerning the above situation, he responded to the students: “Girma is perfectly healthy. Besides, he is fully competent... we do not have doubts about his abilities and he will be your thesis supervisor.” I received a copy of my mentor’s response to the students. Unfortunately, I did not read the original letter from the students that had originally circulated. However, I can infer from this information and the *admonishing* type of discussion I had with my mentor what they could well have written.

I began the task of supervision with no biases hoping that they would finally regret their hasty and wrong judgement. After two months supervision I detected that one of the students (middle aged) was hopelessly unable to write and was extremely insecure. The other student (in her late twenties) was extremely depressed having learnt that she had a tumour that would make her infertile and needed to have an operation as soon as possible. This younger girl explained everything to me at the conclusion of the thesis work. It was the older lady who had written the *accusatory* e-mail. She even confessed to me halfway through the writing process that she couldn’t stand the older lady’s fussy character and minimal contribution to the thesis work. *This is a good example of the strong relationship between lack of competence, insecurity and personal problems and misjudging others or showing scornful character.* There are no surer sources of disdain than ignorance. All the data I gathered during my one-year work testifies to the fact that the most “clever and competent” students have been easy to work with. I have always enjoyed supervising those who are sharp and hard working. Surprisingly I have also noticed openness, optimism and enormous flexibility with the “clever” students.

It is interesting to note that while I was about to finalise the writing of this report (170504), I experienced a similar kind of scepticism with two other students. I had group supervision of 5 research plans with 10 students. The theses were to be written in pairs. I had really nice intensive learning-teaching experiences with four of the pairs. However one group comprising an older woman

and a younger girl had difficulties in understanding me or I had difficulties in understanding them. Their research plan was too broad and unsystematic. They were too ambitious, and could not articulate their plan in simple and understandable language. I then suggested a meeting two days later so that they could revise their plan in a realistic and manageable form. Immediately after this session, they went to the course leader and requested another advisor. To appease them, the course leader assigned another instructor for a one hour extra session with them. At the end of the day the students apparently realised that the other two instructors also told them similar things: the plan was too big: it was somewhat unsystematic, and difficult to manage given the time allotted to complete the task. These students could not realise that *the problem lay with them*. Instead, they projected it on me, and presumably told the course leader that “he could not understand our view points because it is a Swedish contextualized approach” or they may well have said “he could not handle our research plan because of language/cultural problems”. In the end, having realised critical aspects in temporal and substantive dimensions with respect to their research plan, they revised their research plan with the support of the second instructor, and they sent me a note of apology. This last experience adds to my conjectural statement (hypothesis) that slow and sluggish students tend to project their weakness on someone else. In this process, a non-Swedish instructor with a heavy accent and distinctive appearance may have to deal with this extra burden.

I recorded that four or five students from among about 25 students whose thesis work I have so far supervised asked me if I had succeeded with my previous students or if I had advised about thesis work before. Two weeks ago two elderly students, who themselves admitted that they had never written at this level before, asked if I would like to show their half-baked and fragmented paper to one of my colleagues. They said this in response to my gloomy facial expression and critical comments about their incoherent writing style. In all these and other encounters of this nature, I behaved in the spirit of humility, benevolence and cordiality. I have a principle that the calm, reasonable approach is more likely to succeed than the combative one. Maintaining a calm, civic and friendly demeanour does not only avoid an air of confrontation but also facilitates student learning not only about the subject matter but also about “cultivated humanity” – Aristotle’s notions of reflective citizenship and a “citizen of the world” as Martha Nussbaum eloquently discussed in her widely acclaimed book “Cultivating Humanity”. When I think back to my Christian tradition and Ethiopian orthodox songs, they evoke for me the necessity for humility, the sense that it is only when we bow down in a religious sense, when we humble ourselves, that we can be more open. Interestingly, even Ramsden (1992) singled out the

importance of humility and benevolence: “Good teaching is nothing to do with making things hard. It is nothing to do with frightening students. It is everything to do with benevolence and humility; it always tries to help students feel that a subject can be mastered; it encourages them to try things out for themselves and succeed at something quickly. The humility that every university teacher has felt in the presence of his or her subject, the honest awareness of what one does not know is exactly the quality we need to display in our teaching”.

Although I am far from being versatile in teaching skills, generosity, honesty and interest in students and teaching are the embodiment of my professional personality. I experienced a variety of both wonderful and a few unpleasant incidents as I illustrated above, especially at the beginning of my academic tenure. I have learned instinctively that I should not let single incidents affect all aspects of my academic life whatsoever. I have a tendency to put those incidents aside and not to over interpret them as predictive of all future experiences. In fact this positive attitude and perseverance has enormously benefited me. This reflection is in line with action research, and a key element to the use of action research is that of reflection. A tension between self and other, of generating a reflection on the fluctuating place of the subject within a community is a characteristic feature in personal experience, methods and personal narrative and reflexivity. From the statements made earlier, it is not difficult to reflect that my life as a teacher and my life at large are intertwined. “I am a human being as a teacher and I am a teacher as a human being”. Keeping this sense of the experimental whole is part of the study of narrative and autoethnography. I am aware that my stories, reflections and experiences (life) here are particular reconstructions of an individual narrative and there could be other reconstructions. I am not so much concerned about whether this story reflects my past accurately. I am more concerned about the consequences of my story. What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my (professional) life as a teacher and as a human being? This is a process of the (re) construction of personal identity, the desire for continuity and to make sense of my life as a whole. I make no apology when I say that my memoirs have therapeutic consequences.

### Literature seminar

“Literature seminars” constitute the major part of our teaching practices. Students are expected to come to the seminar with a summary of their understanding of the material they have read and with critical reflections. These are small group discussions, and I have found them exciting and opportune moments for authentic student learning and assessment and evaluation of student progress. The eye contact that small groups

create help develop new ways of seeing. According to my one-year experience as a teacher, these small group seminars show that teachers are no longer the font of knowledge but act as coaches and guides on an interdisciplinary journey. Most of the students I interviewed, or had informal conversations with, told me that the seminars were very much appreciated and provocative. Students seem to realise more that we teachers are not keen on the provision of solutions but rather on a clear definition of problems. Some complain that the required reading material is too much. Nonetheless, I have a feeling that these intensive reflective learning processes engage students in ways that are appropriate to the deployment of deep approaches and to practice making sense for themselves. What bothers me is that there are always a few students who skim or flip through material and talk too much. It is therefore imperative to be aware of this kind of divergence between intention and actuality in higher education teaching. Although Ramsden (1992) compiled studies that identified problems with small groups (literature seminar), my own experience with small groups testifies generally to the contrary. The advantages have been that I can conduct a dialogue without having to talk too much; students can be encouraged to talk to each other and realise quickly, as I mentioned earlier, that priority is given to discussing problems as opposed to the provision of solutions.

## Conclusion

This study has combined both traditional (conventional) research methods and current post modernist informed research genres. I started with my personal life in connection with teaching and learning. I have focused on my personal feelings, thoughts and emotions. I have used what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I have undergone and which is still an on-going experience for me at a Swedish university. It is a reflective approach to improving teaching: What does it take to improve teaching while enduring the feeling of "otherness"? How does one evaluate and arrange for the improvement of teaching in order to attain student learning? For me this personal narrative concerns moral work and ethical practice.

I have drawn upon the works of researchers working within socio-cultural / historical approaches to learning and development, critical theory and post-modern theory to help make heuristic sense of my data (my experience) in relation to aspects of the above central questions. It is to be noted that I have attained a rather qualitatively high or deeper understanding of my praxis while writing this essay. Evaluation of my teaching and critical reflection on my practices including the social context I am in is in itself about learning. Changes in understanding of this complex

process occurred through substantive and procedural ways. Roger Säljö described this kind of process of development from purely quantitative views of learning subject matter towards a qualitative conception of learning as understanding, relating theory to practice and abstracting meaning (Ramsden, 1992).

To briefly summarise, my learning of teaching in general and teaching in higher education in particular revolves around: a) teaching methods – replacing a traditional method by a discovery method, b) learning strategies – adopting an integrated approach to learning in preference to a single subject style of teaching and learning, c) evaluative procedure – improving one's methods of continuous assessment.

The above applies to every teacher who enquires into the effects of their activities on their students' learning. However, my "otherness", I presume, adds a dimension to the triangular constellation I outlined earlier. In a provocative and captivating dialogue, Bell Hooks and Cornel West grappled with the dilemmas, contradictions and joys of black intellectual life in U.S.A. They call for greater politicisation and critical engagement in the process of transforming contemporary culture and politics that resonate the educational infrastructure. My experience indicates that the choice to pursue an academic and/or intellectual career in the socially legitimate manner continuous to be an arduous (battle-filled) task for the 'other'. Yet, however, as personal such battles have been, they had to be fought<sup>8</sup>.

Although I am critically aware of the existence of low expectations, prejudices, "strange stimuli", uncongenial responses, emphasising differences of the "outsiders" and autistic communication in dealing with the "other", at least for now my data shows that those few students who overtly show or express inappropriate behaviour tend to be academically weak and emotionally insecure. I have strong evidence that spans a year of continuous observation. One interesting issue which does not easily yield itself to rigorous research is whether these students' prejudices manifest themselves because of pressure and frustration or whether there are similar prejudices held by clever and confident students but kept in check or harboured in the latent sphere. Whether it is true or not I nevertheless have the feeling that lack of knowledge and confidence, ignorance, frustration and "half cultivated humanity" is strongly related to negative biases, intolerance and narrow mindedness.

I constantly ask myself how much knowledge of the Swedish language and culture dilute the problem. Although I am proficient in the formal language, it is still

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<sup>8</sup> James Baldwin has noted that the Black intellectual is "a kind of bastard of the West." The future of the Black intellectual lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent or a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of this hybrid lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world (hooks and West, 1992).

difficult for me to engage in extensive small talk and to fully understand nuances embedded in jokes, sarcasm, jesting and idiomatic expressions. It is not easy to learn communication skills that help to liven up discussions. One other area of the obstacles of communication can be when and how to express anger, when to hold it firmly in check, when to interrupt a conversation, when to stick to a particular line of argument and when to come to a compromise, when to skirt around a subject and when to confront it head-on. This level of knowledge of language is the one which more or less assures one's "full integration" or inclusion in an "in-group", by which I mean into the kernel of the social fabric to which (higher) education is part. Berger and Luckman (1967) noted that one can be capable of learning or "thinking in" the new language. Nevertheless, it is rare that a language learned in later life attains the inevitable, self-evident reality of the first language learned in childhood.

I have applied action research to add to my own (as a reflective practitioner) functional knowledge of the phenomena of learning and teaching. The approach I formulate here is essentially an on the spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This means that ideally the step by step process that I live through is constantly monitored over varying periods of time and by a variety of mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies). The ensuing feed back may then be translated into modifications, adjustments, directional changes, and redefinition as necessary so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing learning and teaching process itself rather than to some future occasion, as is the purpose of more traditional oriented research. However, because the problems of teachers are shared with other teachers elsewhere or in the same school, my reflexivity and personal narrative may benefit others in a similar situation. Our lives are particular but they are also typical and generalizable, since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions. A story's generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they determine whether or not it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Finally, I would like to say that, as far as I can tell, my relationships with my work colleagues function extremely well. In particular I must express my gratitude to some colleagues at the specific unit where I work who, dare I say, seem to *feel* what I *feel*, and are always there for me. These *small Gods* make life worth living.

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