

Narrative teaching. Multidimensional aspects of narration

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ABSTRACT. Narrative teaching, in which the teacher communicates curriculum content in narrative form, is a central method in Waldorf education. In this article I describe how this method can stimulate inner image formation in students and by this means provide them with broader access to the material. In the article I depict narrative teaching as a multidimensional activity. I also touch on the importance of the classroom as a physical background, and highlight how the teacher can create an intimate narrator-listener environment, a room-within-a-room, through the activity of narration. In addition, I explain how the student can arrive at a direct and immediate experience of the narrated content. It is proposed in the article that such an experience of the curriculum content provides the basis for an understanding of it – an understanding that I term experience-based understanding. The article is based on my master's thesis, in which interviews with teachers and students in Waldorf schools form the empirical ground of the study.

Keywords: Narrative teaching, multidimensional, room-within-a-room, experience-based understanding,

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Erzählendes Unterrichten, bei dem der Lehrer oder die Lehrerin den Unterrichtsstoff in erzählender Weise vermittelt, ist eine zentrale Methode innerhalb der Waldorfpädagogik. In dem Artikel wird beschrieben, wie diese Methode bei den Schülern die Gestaltung innerer Bilder anregen und ihnen dadurch einen erweiterten Zugang zum Lehrstoff ermöglichen kann. Der Artikel schildert die erzählende Unterrichtsform als multidimensionale Tätigkeit. Die Bedeutung des Klassenzimmers als physischer Hintergrund wird berührt, und es wird hervorgehoben, wie der Lehrer durch seine Tätigkeit eine intime Erzähl- und Zuhör-Atmosphäre gestalten kann, einen Raum-im-Raum. Ferner wird auseinandergesetzt, wie der Schüler zu einem direkten und unmittelbaren Erleben des erzählten Inhalts gelangen kann. Es wird darauf hingewiesen, dass ein derartiges Erleben des Unterrichtsstoffs die Grundlage für dessen Verständnis bildet, ein Verständnis, das hier erlebnisbasiertes Verstehen genannt wird. Der Artikel fußt auf dem Masterthesis des Autors. Dort bilden Interviews mit Waldorflehrern und -schülern die empirische Grundlage der Studie.

Background and aim

As an experienced Waldorf teacher and as part of my Master's studies I have investigated the method of narrative teaching as used within Waldorf education. One of my main interests in this article is the relationship between teacher, pupil, and the narrative act. Topics I will explore are how the meeting between narrator (teacher), narrative (conveyed curriculum content) and listener (student) can be described, and what kind of understanding the student can acquire from the method of narrative teaching. From an academic perspective, there are few answers to be found - even though this method is essential to Waldorf education; it remains largely unexamined at an academic level. The article consists of four parts. First, a theoretical

perspective on narrative communication is summarised, which is followed by empirical findings, after which a discussion is presented and summary of conclusions finalises the article.

Method and theory

The study was conducted as a pragmatic qualitative study (Savin-Baden, 2016)¹. As the main aim of the study was to explore the positive potentials of narrative teaching (and not its shortcomings), I made a “purposeful selection” of informants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016) – that is, they all had a positive experience of this teaching method. For the interview Kvale and Brinkman (2015) advise the use of an arrangement that can “lead to the production of the kind of knowledge that one is interested in” (p. 137). Such an arrangement was, in my case, that I asked the informants to choose a place in the school that they felt to be suitable for the interview, in order to encourage an emotional closeness to the practice of narrative teaching.

My wish was to include the voice of both teachers and pupils. In order to gather as rich material as possible from informants² with extensive experience of narrative teaching as practiced in Waldorf schools, I approached four active and highly experienced Waldorf teachers and four pupils in the twelfth grade whose education, both primary and secondary, were mainly acquired at Waldorf schools. The empirical material was collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews and each one lasted approximately an hour. The data were analysed thematically in accordance with van Manen (1990, 2016) and Braun and Clark (2006).

The aim of this study was to better understand the method of narrative teaching, regarding the relationship between oral narration and active listening – a field of study in which little has been investigated. The theoretical part of my work is mainly based on one of few classroom studies on narrative teaching, conducted by Kuyvenhoven (2013) as an ethnographic study in a fourth class, and on a study conducted in an English rural environment by Young (1987). They are both, independently from each other, describing the encounter between a teller, a story, and a listener – and suggests that these event that takes place in a physical room, in a mental sphere, and in the world of the story. In this sense, this narrative act is described as a multidimensional process.

Theoretical perspectives

Oral narrative communication of lesson content is a central aspect of Waldorf education. In *En väg till frihet*³ (Waldorfskolefederationen, 2016), narrative teaching is introduced as follows:

Narration is, for Waldorf education, a significant element in the art of teaching. It is a matter of painting with words, of creating internalised images through narration – perceptions – in the pupils. By means of narration, the educator can affect and awaken sensations that nourish curiosity and the pupil’s will to learn. (p. 13, my own translation)

En väg till frihet (Waldorfskolefederationen, 2016) entrusts the teacher with the task of communicating images through narrative technique, and thereby arousing the pupil’s will to learn. Machado Dazzani and Silva Filho (2010) have a comparable view of the significance of narration when stating that when pupils’ imagination is enhanced, it is possible to bring about a broader perspective of a topic. They argue that a pupil assisted by internal imagery and imaginative capacity has the capability to imagine, reflect on, and experience a story from a different perspective and sensorial sphere.

The importance of the pupil’s imagination in the teaching process receives an even clearer emphasis by Egan (2005) who affirms that “Stimulating the imagination is not an alternative educational activity to be argued for in competition with other claims; it is a prerequisite to making any activity educational” (p. 212). According to this author, image-rich teaching can appeal to pupils’ feelings and arouse their imaginative capabilities. The image-forming activity of the imagination is, according to him, not opposed to a rational

1. Also called Basic Qualitative Study (Merriam, 2002), Generic Qualitative Research (Caelli & Mill, 2003).

2. All informants are anonymous.

3. *En väg till frihet* is the Swedish Waldorf Schools’ complementary document to the state school curriculum.

approach to the world. As he states, “Imagination [...] is the heart of any truly educational experience; it is not something split off from ‘the basics’ or disciplined thought or rational inquiry but is the quality that can give them life and meaning” (p. 212).

As I understand them, Waldorfskolofederationen (2016), Dazzani and Filho (2010), and Egan (2005) are in agreement about that a teaching that stimulates inner image formation can create new perspectives and thereby expand pupils’ sensorial experiences of the contents that is taught. Having considered the importance of imagination and inner image formation in education, I will proceed to discuss the encounter between the teacher-who-narrates, the pupil-who-listens and the narrative-that-is-narrated.

A multidimensional understanding of narration

Eliade (1959) affirms that different rooms or spaces have fundamentally different qualities. According to him, a room is characterized by what happens within its sphere. He argues that a sacred room has different qualities from other rooms; considering it as “a sacred space [room], and hence a strong, significant space” and he then continues by saying “there are other spaces that are not sacred” (p. 20). This author refers not only to physical differences but maintains that the sacred room, through its quality, is different. He argues that a space or room beyond its physical dimension includes other dimensions.

A multidimensional understanding of the room is also advanced in the literature on narration, and in trying to describe the meeting between narrator, story and listener both Young (1987) and Kuyvenhoven (2013) are using different dimensions of existence. Independently from each other they describe this meeting as taking place in the physical room as well as in a mental room of narration and in the world of the narrative itself. Below I highlight the description given by Young (1987) and Kuyvenhoven (2013) about how the narration-listening process takes place in, and moves between different dimensions, realms or worlds.

Young (1987) undertook a phenomenological study of narration in an English rural environment in which she considered oral narration as a multidimensional process that embraced three realms “Realm of Conversation”, “Storyrealm” and “Taleworld” (1987, p. 24). She describes them as follows: “The outermost or surface lamination is the story as conversation; the next or underlying is the story as narrative; and the innermost or deepest lamination is the story as events” (p. 211). According to her, several dimensions are necessary to describe oral narration, the innermost dimension is the ontological world of the narrative in which the listener experiences the narrative directly, and in which the narrative exists in its own right.

When Young (1987) describes the narrative as it exists ‘by its own’ in what she terms the Taleworld, she relates to it as to a world of its own right and with its own existence. She maintains that for the characters within-the-narrative this world is the real and normal world. As Young sees it the Taleworld appears as a world in which the narrative content exists in accordance with the rules and laws of that world: “The Taleworld is a reality inhabited by persons for whom events unfold according to its own ontological conventions” (p.21). According to Young, the world of the narrative has its ontological foundation in the Taleworld and, in virtue of this foundation, has its own existential reality.

Kuyvenhoven (2013) conducted an ethnographical study of narrative teaching in fourth grade and made use of three dimensions – or three room-like circles – to describe the narrative teaching. As she explains:

In the first circle, the outer ring, tellers and listeners are talking with stories. [...] In the second circle, participants are thinking with the story they are in a mindful interaction with the story and teller. [...] Finally, in the center, a listener is alone. In a deep imaginative engagement, listeners exclude the circumstances, the teller, and other listeners from their experience with a story. (pp. 61-63)

Kuyvenhoven claims that the listener first, together with their classmates become acquainted with the narrative and its content. In the next stage, the listener appears to be more directly affected by the narrator and the narrative. Finally, he or she loses contact with their surroundings and experience only the narrative act in an imaginative experience of the narrative and its content. From this perspective, the listener ‘moves’

further and further into the world of the narrative, and the intimacy with the narrative content increases as the listener ‘moves’.

Kuyvenhoven (2013) describes how the class teacher she observed had created a special story place – when the storytelling was to begin the teacher sat in the storytelling chair and the students sat on the floor around her. In this first phase, the storytelling was still in what Kuyvenhoven calls “the first circle” (p. 61). In this phase pupils and teacher converse with each other in a trustful and open atmosphere. In the author’s words: “They tell and listen in awareness of each other; they experience themselves as in the midst of their gathering” (p. 61).

When the narrating becomes more intimate, it enters a second phase. Kuyvenhoven describes this as entering “the second circle” (p. 62) in which the narrative act more palpably awakens the listeners’ interest and involvement. In the author’s words: “The storytelling event calls upon an active dialogue between the listener’s mind and the story’s content” (p.62). The listener communicates with, and reflects on, the narrative content on a more individual level. Finally, the listener is drawn into the innermost circle of the narrative act. Kuyvenhoven (2013) states, like Young, that the listener through and within their listening is involved in events within-the-narrative: “listeners are inside their storyworlds, thoroughly engaged with events and a place that is elsewhere. That ‘away-ness’ is observable during a storytelling, where children sit in oddly stilled postures” (Kuyvenhoven, 2013, p. 118). With their consciousness the listeners are in another dimension and partly relinquishes bodily control. According to Kuyvenhoven, this kind of listening demands a different approach than that one of an ordinary listening. In the author’s words: “To stay inside the story demands story-ears” (p. 133). The type of listening to which she refers is not like the hearing-sounds-with-the-ears listening of everyday reality, but a listening that discovers life in the world of the narrative. This is an act of listening involving other dimensions, beings, and existences.

Both Young (1987) and Kuyvenhoven (2013) describe the listener’s experience as a three-stage event. First as an external meeting that transforms into an inner experience, in order to finally become an experience of the narrative as such. As I understand it, narrative teaching moves from the physical environment of the classroom and becomes a meeting between the teacher-who-narrates, the pupil-who-listens and the narrative-that-is-narrated. Finally, the listener achieves an immediate, individual, and direct experience of the narrative content.⁴

The pupil’s experience of the narrative act

The ability to present theoretical knowledge in the form of experienceable images, as is described above, is, according to Steiner (1981), one of the elementary school teacher’s most important assets: “We must appeal particularly strongly to the power of imagination during these years. [...] By stimulating the child’s imagination we can communicate to the child everything that it needs to learn” (p. 205).

Steiner emphasises that the teacher needs to develop his or her ability to use imagination. He affirms that the teacher with the help of the power of imagination can communicate the curriculum content through rich narrative teaching – a teaching that creates experiences in the pupils. According to Dazzani and Filho (2010), the power of imagination gives us the capacity to move to other places as well as to experience the world from other perspectives. In the authors’ words:

Imagination enables us to project ourselves in other situations and observe, reflect and feel the world from another perspective than the current perspective. [...] The perspective imaginatively assumed can even be a perspective of another person and not our perspective. Moreover it may occur that this other perspective involves beliefs that are really not our current beliefs. (p. 221)

In the authors’ view, imagination opens up the possibility of adopting a different relationship to the world from our ‘normal’ one. These authors also emphasise the importance of distinguishing imagination from

⁴ That narrative teaching is not one-way communication, but rather it is in a high degree a cooperative project which is highlighted in my master thesis *Berättande undervisning. Ordens, lyssnandets och blickarnas samspråk* (Green, 2018).

everyday reality. They say: “It is good to have it clear, however, that an important requirement for the imagination is that we know the difference between the current situation and the imagined situation, because otherwise it would be simply a delusion” (Dazzani & Filho, 2010, p. 221). They conceive imagination as a tool and highlight that the world that is experienced in the imagination must not be confused with everyday reality. On the other hand, as they discuss, the feelings aroused are experienced as real: “*What are fictional are the narrated events, not the emotions that readers experience*” (p. 224, emphasis in the original text). Dazzani and Filho state that we can experience the world from other perspectives through imagination and point out that the feelings aroused by these experiences are genuine and real for the person having such experience.

The classroom

In the previous section, I have highlighted the imaginary dimensions of narrative teaching and I turn now to the teaching’s physical environment. Bengtsson, Alerby, Bjurström and Hörnqvist (2006) claim that “rooms can create expectations and be experienced as inspiring, they can create possibilities, but also limitations to learning for both teachers and pupils” (p. 7, my own translation). In this section I describe how the teaching’s physical environment can be of high significance having an effect on the narrative teaching.

A school building is different from other houses: “Houses are never neutral matter. School buildings express educational significations” (Bengtsson, 2011, p. 15). A school and its classrooms represents a place of education in which teaching takes place. Kuyvenhoven (2013) proposes that the classroom partakes, hosts, and affects narrative teaching. This author describes the classroom as “a powerful influential participant that directs the tellers and listeners in their choices and conduct. It shapes the language, meanings and applications of the story” (p. 31). She adds that a classroom “does not merely host storytelling but nourishes, suggests, discourages, and sometimes prevents the storytelling experience” (pp. 33-34). In line with Bengtsson et al. (2006), she affirms that the classroom is an important participant in the narrative teaching.

The classroom and its environment are a part of all teaching and have particular significance in the narrative teaching because this method specifically requires intimacy and openness. Kuyvenhoven (2013) considers that pupils need an environment where they feel secure in order to involve themselves in learning. From this perspective, pupils need a home at school. Bjørnholt (2014) studied the Waldorf schools’ architecture and environment. She affirms that the aim of a Waldorf school is to create such a kind of environment. In the author’s words:

The teachers fully embrace the idea of the school as a place where both teachers and pupils should feel at home. [...] Homeliness at school aims at being home at school, rather than making the school look like a private home. (pp. 120-121)

Bjørnholt stresses that the aim is not to create the feeling of being at home, but rather a feeling of homeliness at school, and a way of achieving this feeling is through the home classroom. This concept is, according to Bjørnholt, an entirely integrated part of the Waldorf education. Pupils go to their home classrooms in the morning where they meet their teacher and where most of the teaching takes place. Bengtsson et al. (2006) agree, and highlight the security provided by the home classroom: “all those who partook in the study stress the importance of a classroom of one’s own” (p. 12).

Based on the principle that the physical environment is of great importance to the child and its development (Bjørnholt, 2014), a particular weight is given in Waldorf education to the formation of the environment. Something which may be perceived in the school’s architecture (Coates, 1997) and in the colours of the walls (Ahlin, 2016; Bjørnholt, 2014). In this respect, Ahlin (2016) stresses that the school milieu is important to the teaching at Waldorf schools: “The Waldorf school sees the child as an individual in a process of maturing and wishes to support this development in the formation of classrooms and subject-specific locales, and in the design of school buildings and outdoor environment” (Ahlin, 2016, p. 75). Each age group has its own classroom and it is there where pupils encounter the greater part of the teaching. This room has a specific design and colour based on the age of the child. The importance of the home classroom is highly stressed in Waldorf education (Ahlin, 2016; Bjørnholt, 2014).

In contrast to the supportive effect of the environment emphasised previously, Bengtsson et al. (2006) claim that the school environment can have a restrictive effect on the learning process. They point out that a room can set undesirable limits through the habitual security that it provides, and they maintain that teaching in the school premises frequently follows given patterns. They highlight the expression “it’s in the walls” (p. 12) discussing that those habits developed in a particular room also have the tendency to affect what occurs in the future in a limiting way.

Empirical data

A multidimensional aspect of narrative teaching is apparent in my empirical data. The classroom is described by the informants as a significant background to the narrative content. Apart from this both teachers and students describe an inner, imaginary space, a room-within-a-room in which narration takes place and they go on to describe how they ultimately arrive in an experience of the narrative directly, as within-the-narrative.

The classroom as background

Lena (teacher) chooses to conduct the interview in the classroom of the third grade – a room that was previously her workplace. She said that this chosen place could help her to remember her past school-working day (she is not working as a class teacher anymore). She looks around, as she was looking for memories. She looks at me, smiles, and says with her eyes and facial expression that the choice of that place was correct. It seems to me that in this room she can recreate the atmosphere and the experience of what it was like to teach her pupils.

In addition to create a teaching atmosphere, the classroom has a significant relationship to the narrative content. For example, Eva (teacher) considers that the narratives belong to a specific classroom: “A particular classroom has a particular atmosphere, where I tell those stories”. From this perspective, the classroom supports the narrative content. Last year she was preparing to conduct a longer period of narration in the eleventh grade, that she for many years had conducted in a specific classroom. She now was faced with having to move to another room but opposed this plan. As she says:

I wanted my class last year to be here [in the original room]; when we were going to change rooms, I thought that this is the eleventh grade classroom; they must hear these things here. It is silly; of course, it is only a physical matter. But this is what it is like for me, it [the narrative] begins to live faster and easier here.

Eva (teacher) feels that the classroom where the narrative act, in her view belongs, makes possible a direct access to the narrative content and that it is easier for her to communicate the narrative in that classroom. It is clear that to her that the narrative content is connected with a specific classroom and that this classroom supports the narrative process.

Narrative teaching creates a room-within-a-room

For the participating teachers and pupils, attention and awareness are important criteria for narrative teaching. Oscar and Wilma (pupils) emphasised the way their teacher-as-a-narrator captures their attention through enthusiasm and attentiveness:

When you have a teacher or lecturer who is aware, then you are much more focused and are sort of drawn into that awareness. (Oscar)

If it is someone who is enthusiastic and can really make it exciting it feels as you are drawn in automatically. (Wilma)

All four pupils describe similar experiences in various ways. Through their listening, they become part of the narrative process. They describe this process highlighting the teacher’s enthusiasm and presence in the

narration, helping and leading them into the narrative content. They take part in the narrative teaching in a more intimate way than that occurring in normal listening.

From the teachers' perspective, it is important to create a mental presence and a calm atmosphere for the act of narration. Eva (teacher) maintains that during the narration a narrative atmosphere can arise that assists the pupils in entering their listening and that they listen within-the-narrative at the same time as being present in the classroom:

When it is a tale that affects them and feels true and when I have succeeded in building up my tale in such a way that they have entered it; such an atmosphere allows them to be "there", [...] they start to look at you [the teacher], the whole [pupil's] body becomes different at that moment and there is this stillness, mental stillness.

Through her act of narration, Eva (teacher) creates a special atmosphere, a protective space around the pupils' listening. All the interviewed teachers agreed that such a space is an essential basis and criterion for narrative teaching. I suggest that this imaginary situation can be describe as a room-within-a-room.

Lena (teacher) describes how she, in order to create an enclosing room-within-a-room, has to, as she puts it, 'embrace' the pupils: "In some way I have to...it sounds so soppy, but embrace them myself. I need to, sort of reach round them – even if I'm only standing there in front of them doing anything, I need to ... [reach them]". She goes on to describe how, in order to maintain this room-within-a-room, she uses speech and looks: "I use, then, these words. What else? I have eye contact, try to have eye contact with them, as many pupils as possible, not staring at them but just so that they have seen that I see them." It seems as though Lena (teacher) creates a mental room as a kind 'embracing gesture' around the class. For her, words become a tool to embrace the pupils with and she uses looks to make individual contact with them. Lena (teacher) goes on to describe how all that is irrelevant ceases to exist, and the narrative becomes the essential part when she and the pupils enter what she calls "a really, really good narrating." She seems to mean that the existence of the classroom and the passing of time become less apparent, and she and the pupils enter an inner dimension of the narrative.

Teachers and pupils' experiences within-the-narrative

Eva (teacher) describes the narrative process as an experience with several dimensions where she moves together with her pupils in different rooms and dimensions. As she says, "I feel I become bigger in some way, which allows me to embrace the room [...]. It is a multidimensional event; I don't perceive my act of narrating, I'm in it". She says that her inner self changes during the narration, she moves – like in a dream – within the content of the narrative together with her pupils. In her understanding the teacher-as-narrator can be in several places and dimensions simultaneously – inside the narrative and at the same time in the classroom. The border between outer and inner, between the concrete world and the world of the narrative is unclear, dissolves. Eva is, together with the pupils, simultaneously inside the narrative, in the narrating activity, and in the classroom. Thus, different rooms, levels of existence, dimensions, and worlds meet and interplay during the process of narration.

In the same way, Lena describes how the border between the everyday experience, the mental images formed by the pupils, and the world of the narrative dissolve. In the following excerpt, she recalls that her pupils once experienced how new content emerged, as it was out of the narrative, and the narrative took on a life of its own. This situation occurred as an introduction in mathematics in first grade. She narrated a story which she illustrated using the blackboard and then erased the drawing with a damp cloth:

And the children, I think, were so absorbed in the story that when they looked at the blackboard that wet patch looked like a pig on the blackboard. Then several children shouted "Miss, Miss, Miss – there is a pig on the blackboard, a pig has got into the treasure house! What happened, Miss?"

Lena (teacher) suggests that the blackboard becomes a kind of path into the inner world of the narrative. The pupils discover a pig on the blackboard, a pig that for them is as real as the rest of the narrative content. Based on what she describes, we could infer that children through their imaginative capacity call up the pig

from the inner world of the narrative, and then let it become a part of the narrative. Lena describes it as follows: “So it was one of those times when the children entered into the story, in some way, and formed it so that it took a new direction.” The border between the imaginative dimension and the concrete reality of everyday life was open. The narrative content revealed itself, entered into and took shape in the dimension of the physical room.

Lena also provides an example of how her pupils together (who are now in the fifth grade) ‘moves into’ the world of the narrative and can experience it from within. In the act of narration, the pupils enter as a class into the narrative and become observers of a battle between the Greek and the Persian armies in the 5th century B.C.:

The children sat very quietly. When I told them that the Greek forces won, they were silent – and then they broke into applause. They weren’t applauding me. It was obvious that they were applauding the Greeks. It was not my storytelling skill or anything like that, that was irrelevant, but they were so involved in the fighting and what it was like that the Greeks received posthumous applause.

Lena’s pupils became observers of the events that she narrated. Her pupils occupied the innermost part of the narrative, they were present on the battlefield, experienced that fighting, the excitement, and the release of the Greek victory – they probably applauded with relief and happiness. Time and space dissolved, the border between outer and inner was gone; the pupils applauded both in the classroom’s physical dimension and within the world of the narrative.

The teachers also describe how above all the younger children are absorbed by and lose themselves in their listening. Anna (teacher) gives an example: “The younger children can be absorbed by the story and lose their bodies.” She means that the child becomes more present in its listening than in its body, something that Lena also provides an example of. Despite the fact that the pupils with whom I conducted interviews explained that over the years they had acquired a greater distance to their listening, they nevertheless said that they still could allow themselves to be completely absorbed by the teacher’s narration. Wilma (pupil) exemplifies this in the following excerpt:

You are sort of immersed into the story, you become a part of it [...] you are really focussed, so you don’t start to think of something else [...] but you really become a part of what is being said.

Wilma (pupil) explains that she can, even in the last year of high school, be immersed into the listening and become a part of the narrative. The difference from earlier years, according to her, is that she can now choose whether to open herself up to the narrative in this way. When she was younger, as she explains, she was more open in general. Although she has lost some of the magic of listening, she has created greater freedom for herself in relation to the teacher’s narration.

In the previous sections, teachers and pupils provided examples of experiences where the border between narrative content and the everyday experience of the classroom becomes diffuse, and even dissolves. The teacher and the pupils experience themselves as within the narrative. The narrative content is described as capable of entering the physical classroom. Thus, the teacher as a narrator and the pupil as a listener exist within the narration and at the same time, the narrative content exists in the physical room. I advocate that narrative teaching embraces and is present in several dimensions simultaneously – it exists simultaneously in the physical classroom, in a mental room created through narration as well as in the world of the narrative.

Narrative teaching: A discussion

In the following part, I will discuss events in, and the significance of, narration’s physical room, narration’s room-within-a-room and its course within-the-narrative.

Narrative teaching and the classroom

Among her conclusions, Kuyvenhoven (2013) describes the classroom as a co-actor in the narrative teaching as well as “a powerful influential participant that directs the tellers and listeners in their choices and conduct.” (p. 31). From my interviews, Eva (teacher) provides a similar example when she is confronted with having to conduct an annually repeated narrative period in a different classroom from the usual one. In her view, the narrative belongs to a specific classroom, a place where she experiences that the classroom environment supports her narrative. She says; “A particular classroom has a particular atmosphere. I tell those stories there.” Another example is provided by Lena, who wished to be interviewed in the third grade’s classroom because that room –according to her– helped her to get into the right mood for the interview. These perceptions exemplify Kuyvenhovens argument of the classroom as “a powerful influential participant” (p. 31, 2013).

That the classroom is a co-actor is also stressed by Bengtsson et al. (2006), who claim that the classroom affects teaching because earlier years and decades of activity are, so to speak, built into the school premises: “It is in the walls” (p. 12). In their opinion this inbuilt tradition and activity mainly has a limiting effect, whereas the teachers in my interviews, on the contrary, seem to feel that the location provides security, warmth, and support. Is it possible that the feeling experienced by my interview subjects as security, warmth, and support can instead have a limiting effect, as Bengtsson et al. suggest? Is that connected to what Eva meant? Was she not open to change?

The premises at a Waldorf school are consciously designed to provide security and support. This is emphasised by Coates (1997) as well as by Ahlin (2016) and Bjørnholt (2014). Ahlin (2016) describes how the classrooms at a Waldorf school, both in form and colour, are suited to the age group of the children who belong there, and Bjørnholt (2014) maintains that the aim of a Waldorf school is to create a home-like environment, but in a school-like way: “Homeliness at school aims at being home at school, rather than making the school look like a private home” (p. 121).

A well-tested way of encouraging the feeling of being at home in the school environment is the continuity provided by a home classroom. The home classroom at Waldorf schools is customary and influences the design of the place (Ahlin, 2016; Bjørnholt, 2014). When we talk of the atmosphere in the classroom, Oscar (pupil) says that a good atmosphere is a decisive factor in determining if he will be able to feel sufficiently secure to open himself up to the teaching. The use of a physical form with the aim of creating the foundation for a particular atmosphere is, as Bjørnholt (2014) says, a noticeable element of Waldorf education. When Eva (teacher) affirms that a certain classroom has a certain atmosphere, she is alluding, in the context of Waldorf education, to the classroom’s colouring, form, relationship to other rooms, history, etc. It is an overall concept that she, without specifically expressing it, appeals to as support for her experience. Bengtsson et al. (2006), however, point out that this kind of experience can also be seen as an obstacle. They observe that when a specific environment is linked to a specific content and a specific class, it can have a conservative effect. For Eva (teacher), the lack of support from the outer classroom arouses an inner resistance that can also be interpreted as resistance to change.

The room-within-a-room of narrative teaching

Young (1987) and Kuyvenhoven (2013) describe a room in an imaginary dimension where the narrator, the narrative content, and the listener meet. Young calls such room ‘Storyrealm’ and Kuyvenhoven, the second circle. In my interviews, the creation of such an imaginary room is emphasised as a prerequisite of the narrative teaching. Eva (teacher) claims that statement when she creates an environment that embraces her pupils. Lena (teacher) has a similar view and affirms that she uses words and her eyes or gaze to create a kind of ‘cover’ around her pupils – an envelope that can be compared to an imaginary room. The potential of the teacher’s gaze to address pupils individually and fill the room is expressed by both Buber (1993) and van Manen (2016). In their view, teachers can be present in their gaze, meet the individual pupil through their look and they can, in this way fill the room with their presence – in a similar way to how Eva and Lena express that they are mentally present in the room and around the pupils.

I maintain that the teacher-who-narrates with the help of his or her gaze and voice can create a mental room for narration, that the teacher-who-narrates mentally embraces the students, and I argue that the teacher can develop an ability to embrace/envelope/cover and include the students in their narrating - tools they say they use are their gaze and voice. The teacher who narrates can create a room-within-a-room, a room of narrative acts and I argue that this room-within-a-room constitutes an imaginary envelope that embraces and forms a room for the teacher's narrative and the pupils' listening and conclude that the room-within-a-room occupies a central position in narrative teaching.

Within-the-narrative

Kuyvenhoven (2009) and Young (1987) both describe the world of the narrative as an independent existential sphere in which, as they say, both the character and content of the narrative exist. They both say, independently of each other, that the content of the narrative has its ontological home in this existential room, and they find support in their empirical work for the view that the listeners can experience themselves as within the narrative and that they can interact with beings in the world of the narrative – this at the same time as they are listening to the teacher's narrative and are present in the classroom's physical environment. I too, in my empirical work find support for similar experiences, as exemplified by Eva (teacher): "I am inside it [the narrative] and often I move around in it a little. The pupils too are with me." That state of being within the narrative act is active and includes the ability to move. This experience is also mentioned by Young (1987), who says that she within the narrative "can move around as an omnipresence, or I can see persons and events as if from a distance" (p. 18). Within-the-narrative is revealed as a both imaginary and spatial dimension, which both listener and narrator take part of and exist within.

An example of how a whole class can be present within-the-narrative and even interact with the narrative content is provided by Lena (teacher). On an occasion, she spoke about the Persian wars in Ancient Greece. According to Young (1987) and Kuyvenhoven (2009), the listener can move within the narrative. In Lena's example, her pupils experienced themselves as being within the world of the narrative. They became observers of the battle between the Greeks and the Persians, a battle that was both geographically and temporally distant from the pupils. They were, to Young's and Kuyvenhoven's way of thinking, present with their consciousness within the narrative. According to Kuyvenhoven, a special kind of listening is required in order to remain in such experience: "To stay inside the story demands story-ears" as she says (2009, p. 133). Her pupils' listening not only helped them to remain within the narrative, but to listen themselves 2500 years back in time. They listened and saw a vision of the fighting, experienced the course of events, and finally acclaimed the victory with a joint spontaneous applause.

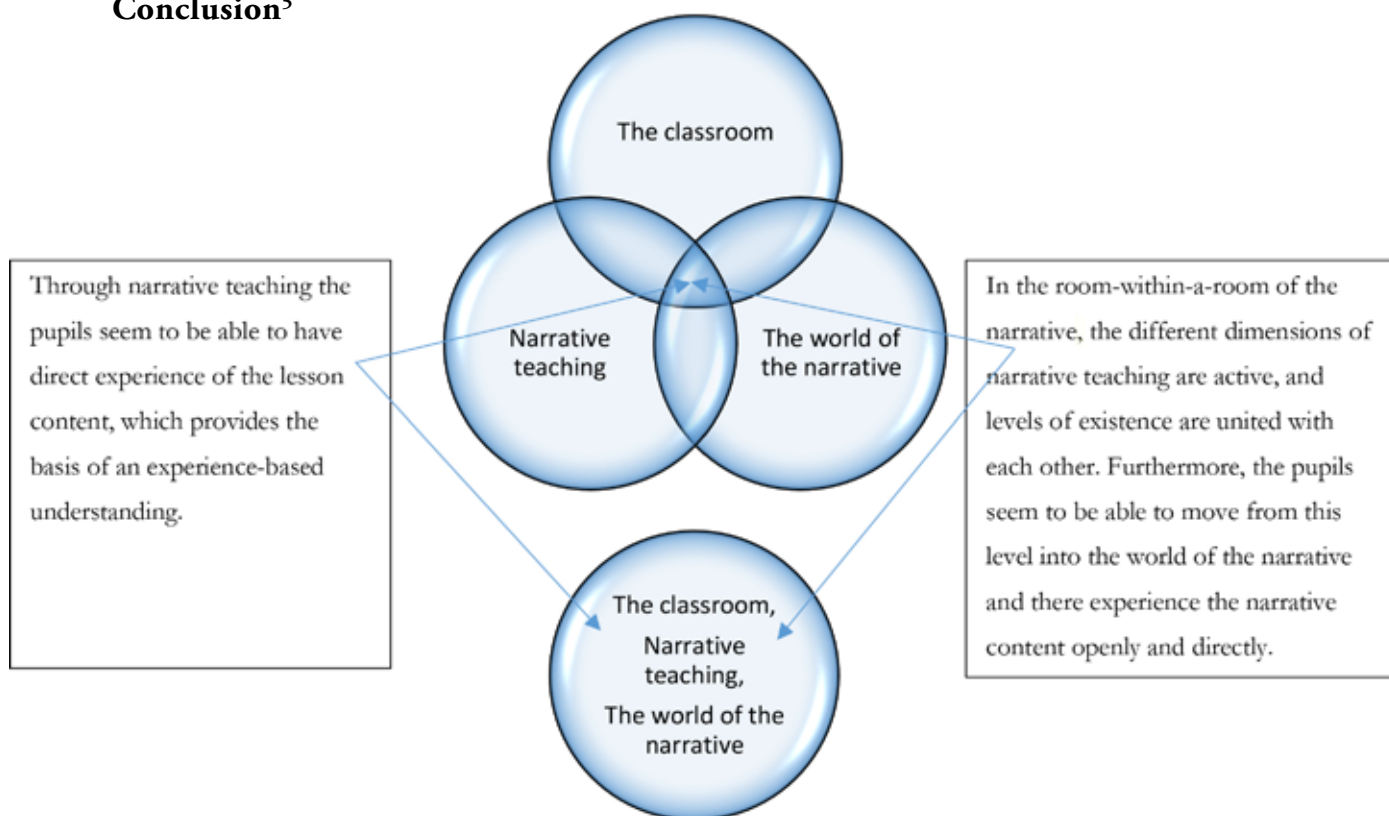
In the described narrative, Lena provides a clear example of how the teacher-who-narrates, by appealing to the pupils' inner imaginative powers, arouses experiences that can assist them in moving through both time and space. From this example, I argue that narrative teaching can be a method of enabling pupils to experience a course of events or a place as though they were themselves present, independently of space and time. I also argue that narrative teaching can overcome the limits of everyday consciousness, time and space. The pupils sit on chairs in the classroom, listen to teacher's narration, are embraced by and enters into the room-within-a-room of the narrative. Being guided by their teacher's words they 'leave' the everyday world and enter another dimension of existence - they now exist within the ontological world of the narrative. I argue that narrative teaching can make it possible for pupils to move around in and experience "another time and place".

I maintain that the pupil understands the narrative content from his/her own experience. I call this type of understanding experience-based understanding. I draw the conclusion that the pupils through their experience-based understanding can acquire direct access to the curriculum content. In other words, the pupils can create their own individual understanding of the curriculum content the through their personal experience of the teacher's narrative. I conclude that the teacher in the narrative teaching has access to a pedagogical tool that can give the pupil access to other places, times, and states. I consider that the concept of experience-based understanding is central to identifying the effect and importance of this kind of teaching.

It is easy for the narrating teacher, and perhaps even easier for the listening pupil, to interpret what one says or hears as a description of real events. The pupils may, so to say, mistake that what they experienced in the ontological world of the narrative for reality. Machado Dazzani & Silva Filhos (2010) argue that the inner images, perceptions, and feelings aroused by the narrative content can be experienced as real, but this experience of reality does not necessarily correspond to the outer reality. Henricsson & Lundgren (2016) emphasise that what the pupil receives, experiences, and understands is not self-evidently the same as what the teacher wished to communicate. An example from the empirical material is when Lena's students discovers a pig on the blackboard while she is teaching them mathematics.

In the present article, the type of understanding that the pupils create out of the narrative teaching is described as an experience-based understanding – through their experience, based on the teacher's narrative education the pupils create their own understanding of the curriculum content. I argue that such experience-based understanding is individual to each pupil, belongs to each one, and can be described as the pupil's interpretation of the narrative and therefore of the curriculum content.

Conclusion⁵



Narrative teaching is, in this article, described as a multidimensional form of teaching. It is described as a kind of teaching that includes the physical environment of the classroom, creates an imaginary narrative room, and extends into the world of the narrative. In this article, the narrative teaching, the physical environment of the classroom, and the content from the world of the narrative are bound together in an imaginary space, which I call the room-within-a-room of the narrative teaching.

One conclusion of this study is that the narrative's room-within-a-room is created through an interplay between the physical environment of the classroom, the pupils' listening, the imaginary world of the narrative and the teacher's narrative teaching. A second conclusion is that, through the course of events that

5. In this diagram the three upper circles refer to narrative teaching's fundamental spaces. The area that is formed where the circles meet refers to 'the room within a room' of the narrative. The lower circle is an enlargement of that room. In the room within a room of the narrative, the classroom, narrative teaching, and the world of the narrative are interwoven.

I call narrative teaching, the world of the narrative is joined with the classroom's physical environment and the level of existence of everyday life. This entails that different levels of existence in the narrative teaching are joined to each other, a physical reality is intertwined with an imaginary one. Some concrete empirical examples of this from my study are when Lena's pupils applauded the Greek victory over the Persians and when her when her pupils saw a pig that had emerged from within the ontological sphere of the narrative and taken physical form on the blackboard.

I conclude that narrative teaching makes it possible for pupils to experience narrated curriculum content directly as though they were present, even when the content the teacher narrates is both temporally and geographically distant from the pupils and that the pupils through narrative teaching can form an experience-based understanding of the curriculum content. I further conclude that such experience-based understanding is of an individual nature and needs to be processed and perhaps reoriented. I argue that narrative teaching can make pupils experience distant places and worlds, events in the past or the future. I conclude that narrative teaching unites dimensions of time and space and makes it possible for pupils to experience curriculum content 'here and now'. Narrative teaching holds a potential for the pupil of accessing an experience-based understanding of the presented curriculum content.

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