

Reflections on Observation as Method

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This article is taken from a chapter in my dissertation *Musical Apprenticeship, Learning as Socially Situated at the Academy of Music*. I will give shortly a resumé of the dissertation in order for the reader to have a context for reflecting on observation as a method.

The dissertation is aimed at empirically exploring apprenticeship as an approach to understand and conceptualise learning. In the dissertation apprenticeship serves as a frame of inspiration to focus on other aspects of learning than only those connected to the relationship between teacher and student. The reason for using apprenticeship as a frame of inspiration is that it provides insights into how apprentices learn with little being taught. The field of study for the dissertation is to investigate how one learns musical skills at a high level and more specifically how one learns to play the piano in a highly skilful manner.

The research site for the dissertation is the Jutlandic Academy of Music with special focus on the education of piano students. The reason for choosing the Academy of Music is that there was both a structure which resembled an apprenticeship education, while at the same time the Academy of Music is an educational institute with a formal structure, rules and exams. The Academy of Music in Aarhus is an educational institute under the Ministry of Culture aiming at promoting classical music in Denmark. There are about 240 students and 35 teachers at the Academy. In general the education is nominated to last five years. The students have lessons with a main teacher all through the education. In addition they have lessons in minor subjects: the student pianists have lessons in accompaniment, rehearsal and chamber music. They also have lessons in ear training and theoretical classes about musical topics. The compositions of lessons depends on whether the students choose to follow the music teacher class or the diploma class.

The dissertation rests empirically on observations within a year at the Academy of Music where lessons, concerts, exams and masterclasses were observed and 16 semi-structured interviews were done with piano students and teachers about the process of becoming a pianist.

Outline of the Use of Observation as Method

The basic assumption in the dissertation is that knowledge of practice and learning is embedded in the social relations in a community of practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). By observing what actually happens in a community of practice it is possible to gain insight into how it operates. Furthermore, it was possible through the observations to create a fertile background for the interviews.

The method of observation is in my study seen as systematic attempts to select, produce and report on those parts of behaviour and surroundings related to individuals' interaction 'there

and then' and which are in accordance with the purpose of the study¹. I will elaborate on the four concepts in my understanding and the use of them in the method of observation: systematic, select, produce and reported: That the observations were *systematic* refers partly to the fact that the social events chosen for observation were considered central for the process of learning. That is, lessons (main subject lessons, accompaniment, repetition and chamber music), internal concerts, matinee concerts, external concerts and master courses. And partly that in the observations of the lessons the themes from the interview guide were applied as a strategy for keeping focus. Furthermore, the observations in the situation were noted down and written out immediately afterwards.

That the observations are to be considered as a situation where the observer observes something rather than something else is implied in the concept *select*. Thereby the observation situation is seen as an active process where the observer on basis of the themes in his/her study selects certain focal points. This selection will be discussed below.

That the observer *produces* certain elements in the observation situation is because the observation, if it takes place in a 'sensitive' social situation, cannot help but affect the situation. This effect on the situation will be discussed below.

Reporting the observations was done immediately after their conclusion by writing down and working through the different observations.

I made a number of observations in connection with tuition, concerts and exams at the Academy. I followed lessons in repetition, chamber music and accompaniment regularly over a period of six months for about three lessons a week. Furthermore, I followed main subject lessons for half a year for about two lessons a week. In addition, I went to internal and external concerts and a single *début* concert. I participated in a master course one weekend with a Russian pianist. I also listened to a couple of final exams.

The observations were carried out so that when convenient I brought my pen and paper to the lessons I wanted to observe. This is true of most of the lessons. In some cases because of customs it was not possible to bring pen and paper, for example, at concerts and master courses, then I tried to memorize what had happened and then wrote it down when I had the opportunity. The observations in the lessons were divided according to the music pieces. That is, the plan was to follow the rehearsal of certain pieces of music from start to finish. To follow the rehearsal of entire pieces of music was partly possible. However, once in a while I was prevented from coming or the student wanted to play something else because of a concert, or something else happened. But it gave me a good impression of the processes that had been described vaguely and unselectively in interviews and pre-interviews.

Thus, I gained some insight into the processes of learning which took place. Unfortunately, it was not possible for reasons of resources to follow the pianist students over a span of time to see which changes occurred.

¹ This understanding of the method of observation is inspired by Weick (1968) and Elklit (1976).

The Strength and Problems of the Use of Observation

The *strength* of the observation made it possible to observe social interaction which can be difficult to explain through interviews. For example, I saw how often and how the imitative aspect operates in the teaching situation, how metaphors are used in the lessons, and how the teacher, being an experienced pianist, uses narratives to include own experiences. Something which was not immediately accessible in the interviews.

Furthermore, observation offers the opportunity to observe the time sequence as well as the importance of the actual spatial arrangement and the organization for the processes of learning. For example, that there was an 'overlap' between each lesson where the student who was waiting had an opportunity to see the previous student's lesson. As I shall comment later the method of observation can help reformulate and specify the field of study while the study is being carried out (Dean et al., 1969).

There are different *problems* involved in using the method of observation. I shall highlight three problems: resources, influence and selection. I mention these three problems in order to explain briefly how they were addressed in my studies.

Observation and Resources. Repeatedly use of the method of observation demands resources. It takes quite a lot of time and effort to be present in certain contexts. Transportation, agreements, cancellations and the time spend being present take up a large amount of time. A large amount of notes were produced and needed afterwards to be made a fair copy of. To limit the use of resources I chose to use the interview as the primary method for data collecting where after the method of observation was a supplement to the interview. This meant that systematic coding, analyse and interpretation primarily were reserved the qualitative research interview.

Observations and Influence. As mentioned earlier, one of the problems of the method of observation is that the observer's presence can affect the social interaction which happens. This is seen in particular in the teaching situation where there is only one teacher and one student present. In connection with bigger concerts my presence as observer was of less importance. In the observations in the teaching situations my presence - as I interpreted it - meant that the teachers took more care to verbalize what was to be learnt and to be even more pedagogically correct in everything that was said. For example, one of the teacher said casually during class, though aimed at me, that, 'he was a bad pedagogical ideal to write a thesis on because he deliberately made mistakes, three times in front of the student' (to make the student's mistakes apparent to the student himself). In any case, my presence made a difference and it was my impression that there was a tendency for the processes of communication to be more legitimized by becoming more verbalized than normally. It should be mentioned that various studies have shown that for the periphery observer to become accepted happens fairly quickly (cf Franke-Wiberg & Johansson, 1975; Björklund et al. 1974; Elklit, 1976). This also happened in my case. I became so much part of the teaching environment that I was even used to turn the sheets.

Observation and Selection. Several different studies have shown that one weakness in the method of observation is that the observer perceives, selects and notes down that which precisely supports the theses in his or her studies (Elklit, 1976; Barber, 1973). To prevent and reduce the selective observation I tried to use the themes from the interview guide as strategy

and focal point in my observations.

The Relationship Between Interview and Observation

The reason I chose to let the interviews be the centre of rotation is partly that it is through them that the participants in the context can express themselves and the meaning of being a musician becomes visible. Partly because the material from the interviews is by far the most extensive. The material from the interviews is about seven hundred and fifty transcribed pages. But the interviews cannot stand alone because they do not represent the context of which the interviewee is part. To use several different methodical approaches is to regard the process of research as a dynamic process, where construction of knowledge is the essence, where there can be a dynamic interaction between observation and interviews. The social reality is, indeed, in many ways immense and it requires several complementary perspectives to be able to form a picture of what happens.

The observation can make up for that and bring to light aspects which can be used in the interview situation. The social practice is often taken for granted by those who take part in it and therefore the participants can become 'blind' to certain elements in this practice. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that the individual is a participant in communities of practice of which she alone cannot see everything (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As mentioned, in a number of cases there was a dynamic interaction between interview and observation. For instance, I interviewed three students right after having seen them take part in a master class. This gave me the opportunity to ask concrete questions about their participation in such a class. In other cases it was possible to ask about actual events in the class in those instances where I had followed the interviewee in class.

To sum up shortly: From the experiences from my dissertation I have argued that observation as a method is an adequate tool for investigating learning as contextually based. Furthermore, observation seems to supplement qualitative research interviews in a beneficial manner. However, observation as a method takes a lot of resources, and involves issues of influence and selection need to be dealt with carefully.

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