

Travel impressions from
EDUCATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITIES
Nordic Educational Research Association's 30th Congress in Tallinn, Estonia,
March 7-9, 2002

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This year's Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) congress was held in Tallinn, Estonia. The congress had 23 parallel network sessions covering topics such as 'Philosophy of Education', 'IT and Education', 'Gender and Education', 'Multicultural Educational Research', 'Sociology of Education', etceteras. Five invited keynote speakers presented in panel sessions; Tom Popkewitz, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA talked about '*Governing the future through fabricating the global teacher/child of the present*'; Beverly Skeggs & Mairtin Mac an Ghail, University of Manchester, UK '*Debated on class, gender, race and sexuality*'; Ari Antikainen & Päivi Harinen, University of Joensuu, Finland talked about '*Living and learning in the new social mosaic of a European periphery*'; and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, University of Roskilde, Denmark talked about '*Education and maintenance of linguistic diversities*'. The congress had 14 symposia that presented specific research projects in depth, for instance work on 'Portfolios and Collaborative Knowledge Building in ICT-oriented Teacher Education' or 'The Organisation and Effectiveness of Pre-school Education in the City of Helsinki'. Abstracts can be found on: <http://www.palmenia.helsinki.fi/congress/nfpf/home2.htm>.

My participation in the congress followed two trajectories of interest, one was learning in workplaces, which is the focus of attention in my Ph.D. project; the other was qualitative research method in education. These two interests flavoured my participation, and will unavoidably also flavour the following account that begins by commenting on two of the four keynote speeches and the problem of having a congress lingua franca. Following this, the few presentations that focused on learning in workplaces is described, and the current status of qualitative research in education is discussed. Taking departure in the observation that qualitative research methods were widely used in the presented research but not much discussed, I asked three senior researchers to comment on the current status of qualitative research methods in education.

We landed in Tallinn airport on Wednesday the 7th around noon; from here a short cap drive took us through areas of industrially looking apartment complexes towards the city, where I checked in at Olympic Hotel. The Russians built the hotel before the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. From my room at 22nd floor I had a great view overlooking the harbour and the old town of Tallinn, which is a beautiful, well-preserved medieval settlement – a sharp contrast to the architectural boring grey complexes surrounding the city centre.

The congress was held in Sakala Centre only a few minutes walk from the hotel. I rushed to arrive timely for the first keynote speech, where Tom Popkewitz, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA addressed cultural inclusion and exclusion under the title: *'Governing the future through fabricating the global teacher/child of the present: constituting nationness/constructing educational research'*. Popkewitz argued, that contemporary school research and pedagogical reforms inscribe the teacher and student in a salvation narrative about the cosmopolitan individual who achieves national well-being and progress in the face of globalisation. This narrative, Popkewitz said, is ironical since it governs for the freedom and liberty of the individual, and yet also is a practice that encloses and divides. Professor Popkewitz delivered a clearly Foucault inspired analysis of nowadays' educational research and practice. By the way without mentioning Foucault's name once.

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, University of Roskilde, Denmark made a keynote speech on *'Education and maintenance of linguistic diversities: Threats, culprits, needs, strategies and hopes(?) in fundamentalist market ideologies'*. She argued that linguistic diversity is disappearing much faster than bio-diversity, up to 90% of the world's languages may be dead or moribund in 2100. 'Killer languages' (English is the foremost among them), pose a serious threat to the linguistic diversity of the world. Even if this claim is right, one may still question whether it should be interpreted as a genuine problem or just as another change in our late-modern world? Skutnabb-Kangas took a clear stance on this question. Establishing a normative argument based on a supposed causal relation between linguistic diversity and bio-diversity, she argued that the disappearance of linguistic diversity threatens bio-diversity, and that this will undermine our chances of life on earth in the long run. I don't have the insight to appraise whether the bio-diversity argument is solid enough to legitimate a normative argument for linguistic diversity. However, it seems to me unlikely that such a relationship is causal in any simple sense.

No matter how speculative Skutnabb-Kangas' argumentation might be, it raises some interesting questions towards the use of language at an international congress like NERA. What languages should be used at that congress: the Nordic languages, English or both? It may also be questioned whether it is ethical to write a travel impression in English? The former question was raised and discussed in a symposium initiated by the board of NERA, who wished to discuss whether the use of English at the congress should increase or decrease. Many arguments were raised for and against English as lingua franca. One of the arguments against was that NERA functions as a platform for building a Scandinavian scientific community with its own terminology and disciplinary traditions, which is deeply rooted within the Scandinavian languages. Other arguments against were more practical, saying that less experienced doctoral students and junior researchers have troubles with presentations in English. Furthermore, that English may cause distortions in communication because those with good command of English will dominate the discussion. Commenting on the former argument, my experience from participating in the congress was that English was generally more of a problem to the older generation of researchers than it was to the younger doctoral students and junior researchers.

The arguments for English were generally more pragmatic. One argument took departure in saying that the Scandinavian languages do not function as lingua franca in the Nordic countries anyway. Finnish, Sami and Icelandic participants have a hard time understanding what is said in Norwegian, Danish or Swedish, not to mention the other way around, which may be even harder. Another argument for making English lingua franca was that any other solution would exclude non-Nordic participants from the congress. The board's conclusion was that if the congress must have a lingua franca, and it seems to be necessary, then English is a good perhaps the only possible solution.

Before continuing, let me shortly consider the question of committing language homicide by writing a travel impression in English? I guess Skutnabb-Kangas on the one hand would say no, following her argumentation that English is only a 'killer language' if it is learned subtractively (at the cost of mother tongue), not if it is learned additively (in addition to mother tongue). On the other hand one could argue, following one of the arguments against increasing English at NERA, that submission to the dominating language regime of English support it's 'killing' tendencies. The language problem is certainly not an easy one to solve.

After the keynote speeches I hurried out in the hall to swallow some coffee while I tried to orientate myself in the programme, looking for the lectures on qualitative research and learning in workplaces. I found out that neither of these topics was well represented in this year's programme. Learning in workplaces was only addressed directly in one network session, 'Adult Learning – Inside and Outside Institutions' and in one symposium, 'Work – A Landscape of Learning'.

In the network session on adult learning, Martin Bayer, Jens Johansen & Kristian Larsen presented a pilot study on '*Medical practitioners' learning in practice*'. Taking point of departure in Bourdieu and Bernstein, they analysed a clash between what they called a "workplace curriculum" formed from below, and a "school curriculum" formed from above. As I understood the differentiation, the school curriculum represents theoretical knowledge about medical practice, which is largely incommensurable with the workplace curriculum that represents practical, contextual, small-scale knowledge. The two concepts framed an interesting discussion on recent political initiatives towards letting the school curriculum invade the everyday work practice. The question discussed was whether such an invasion will alter the workplace curriculum and in which ways?

The symposium '*Work – A Landscape of Learning*' was co-ordinated by Klaus Nielsen. It explored issues of learning in work situations as part of apprentices' and pupils' vocational education. Landscapes of learning were used as a metaphorical frame for understanding the different learning processes in workplaces. The participants in the symposium focused on aspects of learning within different trades and professions. Steinar Kvale and Klaus Nielsen introduced the metaphor landscapes of learning and its theoretical background in situated learning theory. Peter Musaeus spoke about the Janus-face of salesmen's reproductive tasks as both a resource and a barrier for learning. Claus Elmholtz compared two practical landscapes of learning in a shipyard and an IT company, and argued that learning should be understood as

a nexus of reproductive, reconstructive and innovative learning. Lene Tanggaard Pedersen presented her research on electro-mechanics learning trajectories, and Rasmus Hansen focused on responsibility as a resource for learning. Jens Wilbrandt talked about learning across school and workplace, and showed how these two contexts articulate largely different understandings of knowledge and learning. Finally, Klaus Nielsen and Line Thatt presented a survey on apprentices' understanding of learning in workplaces, and Kristian Larsen talked about nurses' learning at work, focusing on tool use and bodily learning. The discussion afterwards focused on some of the themes that were not discussed in the presentations, such as power, money, gender and socio-historical analyses of the trades.

Once again out in the hall with yet another cup of coffee, and skipping through the programme, I realised that if the abstracts tell the truth, qualitative methods were largely applied but not much discussed at the congress. This tendency was reflected in the network session on '*Classroom Research and Ethnographic Studies*' that presented a host of interesting qualitative studies, but did not address questions of methodology much. One exception was a late afternoon presentation by Dennis Beach & Marie Carlson, University of Gothenburg. They discussed a combination of ethnography with discourse analysis that allows conventional ethnographical data to be supplemented by a discursive dimension and vice versa. They argued that such a combinatory approach adds value to research about meaning making processes and identity.

Qualitative research in Nordic education

I began to speculate about the current status of qualitative methods in Nordic educational research, and decided to ask some senior researchers the following questions:

Educational research has traditionally been a forefront area in developing and discussing qualitative research methods, but not anymore or what? This year's NERA Congress presents no new developments in qualitative methodology and only a few sessions raise and discuss methodological problems directly. How should we interpret this? Looking at the conference abstracts it seems as if qualitative research methods are used a lot in educational research, but they are not much discussed, at least not 'front stage' as a congress may be said to be. Is it because qualitative methods have become so mainstream that they do not need much legitimation work anymore? If so, what are the consequences of this? Is it possible to stay methodological sharp if methodological questions are only discussed behind the scenes with peers?

The first one I bumped into was Karen Borgnakke, University of Roskilde, who has worked with field study methodology for several years. Educational research should rest on three pillars, one is theory, the other is empirical evidence, and the third is method, and we have to discuss all three on a conference like this, Borgnakke said. She agreed that the main reason why discussions on qualitative method have disappeared from the front stage might be that they do not need much legitimation work anymore. Following this, she pointed out that the discussion has moved towards pre-congresses and Ph.D. courses, and agreed that this is a problem. We need to discuss methods up front to stay methodologically sharp, she said.

Borgnakke also stressed another weakness in the field of education, namely that it is possessed and haunted by normative research. We need more descriptive research, which is critical of what is said, and we definitely need more peer critique. Researchers are obliged to criticise one another's work, it should be an integrated part of the research cycle, but it is to a high degree non-existent.

During the reception Friday I meet Michael Uljens, University of Helsingfors, whom I asked the same questions. Uljens began by criticising my use of the term qualitative method; it is not precise enough to talk about qualitative methods, and it reflects a dichotomy with quantitative methods, which is unhelpful. We need more differentiated discussions focussing on for instance hermeneutics, on which he has just organized a seminar in Helsingfors. Why don't we see such discussions here at NERA, I asked and continued, is it because qualitative methods are largely legitimised? Yes I think that is very much the case, Uljens said. The whole thing has tipped towards qualitative methods; they have become mainstream in educational research. In Finland it is very hard to find anyone who knows about or can teach statistics nowadays. For many years the discussion was very polarised quantitative vs. qualitative. Nowadays, qualitative methods have largely taken over the scene in educational research. It is not necessary to do much legitimation work on qualitative methods anymore, but that does not mean that we can stop questioning the methods. Maybe qualitative method is regaining its breath after the fierce battle with quantitative method, but that is no excuse; it is still important to ask critical questions. If we stop questioning things development will stop. The discussion must be kept alive by asking new questions. We have to do more internal critique, which is largely neglected at present.

During the congress dinner Saturday night I met Bjørn Hasselgren, University of Gothenburg, who is editor of the journal Nordic Educational Research. Bjørn Hasselgren works within phenomenography, which is an empirical approach to the study of people's conceptions of the world around us, deduced from phenomenology and using qualitative methods. He promised to answer my questions if I send them by mail. So I did, and Bjørn wrote back:

"I think there are mainly three reasons why we experienced nearly no discussion on qualitative method at the congress in Tallinn.

- (i) At least in Sweden, Norway and Finland qualitative methods are very much accepted within the field of education.
- (ii) In the three countries mentioned, I think phenomenography as a qualitative method, with its output of more than 100 doctoral theses and by now around 20 professors, has made a large contribution to the legitimation of qualitative methods.
- (iii) It is very difficult to discuss methods as such. In the long run, to be meaningful, this discussion presupposes deep methodological understandings, which not many of us actually are in possession of. You got to have access to empirical data to get around that obstacle, and few wants to pay that amount of attention within the framework of paper

sessions at a conference like the NERA Congress. Here a symposium, however, might have been an alternative.

The three senior researchers agreed that the qualitative approach has become mainstream and does not need legitimation in relation to quantitative approaches anymore. The polarised discussion between quantitative and qualitative methods are history, and that seems to imply that we have stopped discussing qualitative methods up front at congresses like NERA, and that is a problem. A conclusion may be that we should find new ways to keep the discussion on qualitative methods alive.