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Zoom in on ‘nearness’

Because of Covid-19 a lot of teaching has been virtual at university during 2020. To preserve some of the experiences of teachers immediately from this period, DUN, Danish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education, invited all members to write 1-2 pages for a time capsule in DUT, DUN’s digital periodical. My proposal was entitled *Zoom ind på nærværet i denne C-tid (Zoom in on presence (nærvær) in this C-Time)*:

I chose to become emeritus at Dramaturgy a few months before a surprising Covid 19-lockdown came to be – after more than 40 years at Aarhus University. Lucky for me, and lucky for my students, who know, I am almost an IT-illiterate. I have used computer in lessons, but I have also asked people to shut down their apples and mobiles in order to solve some problems without seeking every answer on ‘the net’.

The Corona situation made me think of my time as a student at Institute of Nordic Language and Literature in Aarhus in last century, where computers didn’t exist yet, and lessons were quite ‘analogue’. The computer and contact via it has created many good possibilities, but pedagogically I basically (grundlæggende) prefer togetherness face to face in the same room.

At Nordic I had much benefit and pleasure (Danish: At gavne og fornøje) of a ‘double conscience’, when I was taught: I heard what was said and considered it, but at the same time I often tried to notice the body language of the teacher, and the way they spoke. That’s their basic remedies as pedagogues: Their breathing, their pause technique, their way of saying sentences, mimic, gestures, looks – their addressing different parts of the room or not. Some were mostly right- looking (højreorienterede), others looked mostly left.

When I many years later should give a micro course in body language for colleagues from different faculties, the last task surprisingly ended this eye opening way: Three volunteers, that I didn’t know, should prepare a small text for presentation in plenum. One by one they came in and presented it their way for us ‘students’. I had directed ‘the students’ to respond to the coming lecturer. Before the last presenter the ‘auditorium’ was asked back up max – without clapping, applauding. ‘The lecturer’ came in and started, but after no more than one minute the person broke off, pointed at the audience, and shouted: I know, what you are up to! Tragic perception – and maybe still happy – the colleague suddenly experienced, that you are looked at and constantly evaluated in everything you say and do as a teacher. Like it or not. Such a perception can be used for your own benefit instead of being repressed or directly traumatizing.

Ironically not only teachers can be unconscious about their own effect. Quite many students are unfortunately also right ignorant concerning their own importance for a successful teaching/learning. (A few may know too much). That's why I have sometimes started a common discussion about responsibility with this three-joint exercise: 10-15 volunteers join a small, cheerful experiment. They form two rows (A and B), and the rest place themselves as spectators. In every task the volunteers must express themselves their own way. I count to 5, and everyone takes a position and holds it till I say thank you. A should illustrate the 'horror team'. Then B shall illustrate the 'favourite' team. At last A and B shall illustrate the 'average team'. Everything is unprepared, and many illustrations are often very surprising. After a lot of common laughing we have normally got a good discussion about reactions to teaching – and I tell them, that I see many of their (lacking) reactions. Together our mutual reactions create a good or less constructive learning situation.

Distance learning can supplement but not replace presence-lessons/workshops. So much happens in the common room, that cannot be used sufficiently via Zoom, Team or Skype. Teaching/learning is give-and-take. And much misunderstanding or lack of understanding is easier to correct, when you can see and hear each other more directly and clearly. Important nuances in communication are easily lost between screens, that can do so much else, that many others know much more about than I.

- excerpts from a Pedagogic Time Capsule