

Don't Get Me Wrong-Using "Own Experience" and "Proven Experience" in Assignments and Student Texts

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to illustrate the ambiguity of the two related expressions "own experience" and "proven experience" by examples taken from home assignments and student texts. First, the "own experience" expression is exemplified in the sense of "acquaintance with" without being necessarily combined with theoretical knowing. With inspiration taken from the theory of knowledge the question of what it may mean when people express their own experience is discussed. Secondly, the concept is related to notions like intelligence, life wisdom and maturity, which are supposedly associated with skill, ability and, possibly, routine. The interpretation suggests understanding the concept as a form of scientific attitude. Thirdly, "proven experience" will be dealt with. This expression is perceived as practice and training, supposedly leading to know-how, expertise and practical knowledge. This section includes references to working life research. The conclusion discusses, with minor digressions on language and memory research, whether it is at all reasonable to use concepts like "own experience" and "proven experience".

The concepts of "own experience" and "proven experience" occur frequently in higher education assignments in Sweden. This is especially true in professional education, where it has almost become a virtue to take advantage of one's field experiences. Students' own experience is often put in relation, or even opposition, to scientific knowledge. This personal experience is then assumed to represent another form of knowledge than scientific knowledge.

However, it is far from clear what is meant by "own experience" and "proven experience", the way the expressions appear in home assignments and in texts delivered by students in answer to these. Nor is the use of discussing and relating to one's own and proven experience always made explicit. Could the result be that students are becoming wiser or is it a way of demonstrating that the university takes their experiences seriously?

The aim of this article is to illustrate the ambiguity of the two related expressions "own experience" and "proven experience" by examples taken from home assignments and student texts.

First, the "own experience" expression is exemplified in the sense of "acquaintance with" without being necessarily combined with theoretical knowing. With inspiration taken from the theory of knowledge the question of what it may mean when people express their own experience is discussed. Secondly, the concept is related to notions like intelligence, life wisdom and maturity, which are supposedly associated with skill, ability and, possibly, routine. The interpretation suggests understanding the concept as a form of scientific attitude. Thirdly, "proven experience" will be dealt with. This expression is perceived as practice and training, supposedly leading to know-how, expertise and practical knowledge. This section includes references to working life research.

The conclusion discusses, with minor digressions on language and memory research, whether it is at all reasonable to use concepts like "own experience" and "proven experience".

It may be added that most examples are taken from pedagogy, which is my own field. This is not to say that pedagogy stands out from other disciplines with regard to the aspects studied.

Interpreting “own experience” as “acquaintance with”

A common notion of the expression “own experience” is that it concerns *acquaintance with* certain actions or a certain subject, without being necessarily combined with theoretical knowing. The craftsman may be a typical representative, as somebody who has the skill to perform certain tasks without being able to make theoretical statements about them (*Filosoflexikonet*, 1988). Students’ own experiences of teaching and learning and of teachers, cooking, train delays, national characteristics, etc., may fall within this interpretation.

The examples below consist of extracts from the national evaluation of Year 9 students¹. The students were encouraged to write about their own experiences in the form of memories and impressions of their school years. These particular texts concern their own experience of teaching and learning.

Task 1. My school years

... Write a *column* for your school paper containing memories and impressions from your school years!
(Skrivbanken, test part C, p. 23)

Why do I hate elementary and middle school? Because it is just a great waste of children’s time. In Grunnebykvarn, anyway. They have on the whole no good teaching pedagogy whatsoever. Maths was a joke... Teaching in Swedish hardly existed. Only that you learn to read and write in Years 1-3. After that it wasn’t even on the timetable. English was OK, but rather disorganized. Social studies and science studies and all the other subjects we were supposed to have we didn’t. (114224) (Text 1)

We did a lot of theatre in Years 4 and 5 and we did research on a lot of different things. Then when we were supposed to do presentations all was very good. We did research on space and one group had built a space ship and had green make-up. A very good way to make the listener wake up. We also used to film a lot of things. This space task, for example, we made a film of and they all wanted me to shoot. I was rather proud of that, I suppose. (742214) (Text 2)

In the following example, taken from my own practice in a course in the Library and Information Science programme, the task formulation does not contain any explicit demand for relating to the students’ own experience, but this is still done implicitly. The students are asked to position themselves somewhere in a model created by a course book author. In the oral instruction reference is made to their own long experience of being taught, which is supposed to guide their positioning. This is followed by:

a/ describe why this is where you position yourself (...). b/ refer to a few (at least two) possible theories that lie close to where you positioned yourself, taken from Illeris’ book (...). State some reasons why you find them appropriate. You should refer briefly to each thinker so that a less informed reader can roughly understand what you mean.

In a group subjected to the same influence, every individual learns something specific that separate them from one another, since their schemas have developed differently although they have been subjected to the same influence. (Illeris ...)

I don’t think we were born with conditions that make us more or less smart. I think it is a question of what conditions we had while growing up and I think that the first few years are the most important for how we develop our habits. I simply believe that you learn to become a thinking human being. A reading human. An analyzing human. How do our parents do things? We do the same. I have, for instance, done what is called a ‘class trip’. Neither of my parents studied at the university level, but I do, and so do my brothers and sisters of the same age. (Text 3)

In the example from the lower secondary school the task was to speak from the students’ own experience, regarded as an asset and necessary starting point. Once the students have arrived in the university the concept recurs in the formulation of tasks. Some of them will probably, more or less as in Text 3, base their statements on their acquaintance with different environments and will consequently repeat descriptions similar to those they made in the comprehensive and upper secondary schools. Unless other instructions are given and other interpretations discussed, it is their own experience, of any kind, that students describe.

¹<http://www.skrivbanken.se/other.jsp>

The examples illustrate “own experience” in the sense of “acquaintance with”. Any individual, or any student, has simply lived in and been influenced by different environments, in everyday life, in school, etc., which has given rise to a multitude of experiences.

“Own Experience” in the Light of the Theory of Knowledge

What does it mean when people give expression to their own experience? Some help towards a deeper understanding of the concept may be offered by the theory of knowledge.

A person’s own experience may be perceived as a corpus of previous experiences that form the starting point of a further stage in the learning process. This leads, for instance, to the question whether “own experience” can be considered a true description of what somebody has experienced or if it is made up of interpretations, post-event reconstructions, reflections, distortions or even wishful thinking.

On the basis of a figure of thought akin to naive realism human beings receive true knowledge about what things, like chairs, really look like. In some way, the human mind can build up some copy that basically resembles the true features of a chair.

The “Development” blog, launched by Master Coach, includes the following comment on one of the company’s homepages:

I like sitting with a cup of espresso leaned back comfortably reading DEVELOPMENT. The input is well-balanced and food for thought, in small doses, a little now and then when time is short. It is inspiring and encourages you to link up with your own experience. Birgitta Keller² (Text 4)

As in naive realism, impressions from the blog seem to be transmitted to Keller’s consciousness while she reads, but the impressions are stored separately (in a specific part of the brain?) as inspiring food for thought.

Using a figure of thought inspired by a hermeneutic approach, the world is interpreted the very moment we experience it (Vattimo, 1997). This makes it impossible to do like Keller and choose at what stage to switch on one’s experience. It turns up immediately. The world is conceptualized, categorized and made meaningful; something exists between the human experience and the world. Making a slight reinterpretation of Immanuel Kant’s distinction between the world per se and the world for us, there is a kind of filter which immediately and unknowingly to us pre-interprets the world. Therefore we do not enter an act of interpretation empty, but inevitably face the situation starting from our pre-understanding (our problems, our sense of being, our field of questions and our scope of meanings (*Vårtidsfilosofi*, 1987)). In other words, our own experience affects our perception of the new in the light of our previous memories and experiences.

While Text 1 gives a really dark picture of middle school, Text 2 is very positive. One might reasonably assume that both students’ school years contained both ups and downs, but something, probably later in life, lies behind the recapitulation, so that one or the other is focused on.

Gadamer, the hermeneutician, describes the interpretation of a certain event as a fusion of horizons between the present and the past. One cannot place oneself outside oneself and become one with that which one tries to understand. The result of the interpretation is neither a description of the past (one horizon) nor of the present (another horizon), but a compromise (a fusion of horizons) (Wachterhauser, 1986). In the light of this, one’s own experience always develops into a reconstruction emanating from the present. What one seems to remember does not agree with how it actually was, but the past has been transformed and reinterpreted and, consequently, lost. In analogy with this, Texts 1 and 2 may be looked upon as the fusion of horizons between memories of school experiences and the present life situation.

Ricoeur objects to Gadamer’s notion that one can penetrate into other people’s life worlds or, more precisely, the intentions behind a certain text, and claims instead that we should remain sceptical and unmask what is actually hidden behind what is said. The text and the other may be victims of false consciousness (Mansikka, 2010).

²<http://www.mastercoach.se/Blogg.html> (2010-04-08)

In this context, Nietzsche talks about a master-slave mentality and the striving for pleasure and power which lies behind acting, while Marx maintains that man is alienated, and according to Freud we are driven by irrational forces unconscious to us (Scott-Baumann, 2009). What we perceive as our own experience can, in other words, be viewed as expressions of something that we are aware of, or are even unable to become aware of on our own.

Following Ricoeur, we should thus be more sceptical in looking at student texts and make an effort to see through them. With short extracts it is difficult to make such interpretations. If, in spite of these difficulties, we pursue Marx's alienation theory, the real object of school is to foster students to becoming obedient citizens who accomplish their tasks within a capitalist system. The reason behind the frustration shown by the student in Text 1 might be that she does not see through the oppression mechanisms of capitalism and therefore turns her aggression towards pedagogy and bad teachers instead of rebelling. The student in Text 2 may, according to this reasoning, be supposed to be so well adapted that she does not even have a glimpse of the oppression lurking below the surface.

Another figure of thought inspired by hermeneutics is to look upon human beings as constructors of knowledge or as constantly making up *theories* about reality. In this case, their own experience includes the previous theories they have constructed, which are somewhat modified through each new experience. These theories may be of a commonplace or reflective nature or a mixture of both. One consequence of this is that one becomes more experienced by reflecting on one's own experience, which thus, so to speak, creates yet another experience. Concepts like reflection or metacognition lie close at hand. Another consequence is that the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge becomes fuzzy, in that the practical knowledge, too, consists of constructions in the form of theories. Text 3 may thus be looked upon as an account of theories of how to become a thinking, reading and analyzing human being.

One figure of thought related to naive realism is that human beings gradually build up an increasingly advanced experience of their own, in the sense that its knowledge content more and more corresponds to how things actually are. Nine-year students possess their own experience, but since they have not been exposed to very much, it is less developed. University students are older and have consequently built up a bigger life experience of their own, which has been honed by adversity making it more genuine and true. Socializing and talking with others have further refined their own experience.

This figure of thought can be illustrated by reference to Björk & Uljens (2009), who do not represent naive realism, but whose starting point lies within hermeneutics. They claim that, in addition to physical birth, human beings undergo two further births, to culture, and to freedom. Being born into culture means developing an empirical personal identity relatively unreflectively and successively. This building of identity takes place in relation to other people and to the surrounding community, and hence also in relation to a linguistic and cultural space created by others.

Ideally, the third birth is to achieve a condition of cultural autonomy and authority over one's life, which enables one, according to Uljens (2004), to question one's own values, beliefs and what is taken for granted as well as that which is of cultural origin. In other words, entering a dialogue with the dialogue.

In this perspective, "own experience" is chiefly rooted in culture. Descriptions of this may thus be considered as rather unreflective accounts of memories of something that has happened in the past. We are also likely to remember things more clearly that have had an emotional impact on us than that which belongs to commonplace routines. If nothing special has happened on a largely satisfactory day, this will probably fall into oblivion, which is not tantamount to saying that one's own experience cannot be well thought out, analyzed and reflected.

However, if Uljens can be trusted, we can require more of reflection and moderation to make students better prepared to question their own and other people's experiences. Text 1 could, for instance, have been more modified. Is it really true that there was no teaching in natural and social sciences and that there was hardly any Swedish at all?

"Own Experience" as "Intelligence", "Life Wisdom" and "Maturity"

In the section above "own experience" was described in the sense of "acquaintance with". Another, partly contrasting interpretation is to view it as a more advanced variety of knowledge. "Own experience" is here perceived as synonymous with qualities like *intelligence*, *life wisdom* and *maturity*.

Those who have acquired these qualities, perhaps as a consequence of reflection, can also be assumed to possess *skills, ability* and possibly *routine*. The latter concepts add yet another related interpretation of “own experience”. However, in both cases the “own” epithet is somewhat artificial, even if those who express wisdom, intelligence and ability speak from their own experience. “Routine” gives associations to working life, an angle which will be commented on in the next section.

This interpretation points away from more commonplace descriptions of “own experience” towards perceiving the concept as a form of scientific attitude and as a more advanced proficiency. Thanks to being so wise and intelligent, students may ably and skilfully solve the tasks assigned to them, which will in turn lead to greater wisdom. Aristotle’s term “episteme” reflects some of the interpretation, as a description of a kind of researching knowledge formation, aiming at explaining and understanding the world (Badersten, 2008). “Own experience” here also includes traces of “teckne”, which is in my opinion more instrumental and craftsmanlike and hence production- and goal-oriented. Badersten argues, however, that the forms of knowledge are hard to distinguish from one another, as knowing and knowledge are intertwined with one another.

In the Library and Information Science programme, or more exactly the module which the School of Education is responsible for, students are required to make a first draft of their own fundamental view of pedagogy in accordance with the following guidelines:

In your answer you are expected to refer to the different thinkers introduced in each of chapters 3-10. .. Where you disagree, thinking that one of them, for example Plato, is of no help to you, you are expected to argue briefly why you cannot draw upon him...

Try to keep your fundamental view of pedagogy together in the sense that the pedagogical situation is compatible with your views of knowledge, etc. One recommendation is that you start by formulating your view of the pedagogical situation and then try to find theories that may be compatible with it.

I agree with Locke (Stensmo p. 109) that health and body should be in focus for pedagogy during the first years of life. Motion and play can be a good activity for children in those ages, since they move around a lot and learn at the same time. Locke says that “a sound mind in a sound body” is a complete description of happiness in our world. On the other hand I don’t agree with Locke when he thinks that “children should be hardened, e.g. by learning to stand pain and cold”. This seems incredibly mean...(Text 5)

As before Dewey is the one closest to my views here, too. I am convinced that in learning practice is also important and that it is by acting that you learn. Some things you just can’t learn from books. Like Dewey I think it is dangerous to split up different educations into “practical” and “theoretical” since this could lead to class conflicts, for example. I think that the best education you can get is the one that mixes theory and practice. As Dewey says, “the theoretical and the practical are tightly interwoven. Theory is required to understand how things work and why things are in a particular way. Practice is what you need to be able to see how you can use this knowledge” in real life. (Text 6)

I also think there is something in Plato’s four levels of human consciousness (pp.72-73), that some people have a more concrete way of thinking and some are somewhere in between. Where we are affects our ability to take in the abstract and get insight by thinking or meditation. On the other hand I think that we are born with some conditions that support different qualities, but that you also have the ability to learn and develop the thinking you are striving for. Locke assumes in roughly the same way when he says that we get different ideas because of different experiences, but he still thinks that we are all born empty because otherwise we would get the same ideas (p.105) (based on Plato’s statement that we all strive towards perfection in the world of ideas I suppose). (Text 7)

In Text 5 fragments of Locke’s thinking are put in relation to conclusions drawn from the student’s own experience. The student in Text 6 makes a somewhat longer summary, this time to Dewey, but mixes in his own experiences, which makes it hard to keep them apart. In Text 7 the summaries are clearer and longer, as are the comparisons between Plato, Dewey and the student’s own reflections.

Text 8 is taken from a doctoral dissertation by Eriksson (2009), whose contents happen to anticipate the following section. There are no descriptions of the writer's own experience here, but summaries, comparisons and interpretations supported by quotations, all being part of the argumentation, are included.

In contrast to Hartman's and Gustavsson's description of proven experience as more or less personal, Lindberg (1995)87, Franck (2000)88, Selander (2006)89 and Bronäs (2006) emphasize that it is rather a matter of a form of collective experience shared by several individuals. Lindberg writes that there is no complete proven experience (cf. Kallos, 1995) in the form of a uniform knowledge mass from which teacher educators can draw, but that proven experience can be brought to light in conversation. He is sceptical about treating individual teachers' personal experience as proven experience (Eriksson, 2009, p. 96). (Text 8)

In this example the author's own experience of working with texts are in focus. By assiduously performing such work one's own experience increases in the sense of ability and skills. Approaching texts in this manner also requires being well read up to be able to determine, for instance, which texts are relevant, which contents are comparable and what conclusions can be reasonably drawn. Writers like this one also alternately develop their own experience in the sense of intelligence and life wisdom.

The four examples show a progression (albeit not within the same person) where more commonplace personal descriptions are pushed to the background to be replaced by the writer's own experience like skill and intelligence. It is probably the latter use that those who construct assignments generally want to accomplish even though it has not been made explicit either to themselves or to the students. This is a matter I will recur to.

Drawing parallels to generic abilities and a strict adherence to scientific standards lies close at hand. Strict adherence to scientific standards may be understood as a questioning and reflective attitude (Sellbjer, 2010). In the Higher Education Ordinance, Section 8, the emphasis is on the importance of students developing the ability to make independent and critical assessments, to independently distinguish, formulate and solve problems as well as searching for and evaluating knowledge on a scientific level. In this sense, the strict adherence to scientific standards also forms part of the fundamental mission of the educational system and of universities in particular, namely to educate critical citizens to form the democratic society of the future.

By generic abilities are meant capacities of a more basic character with general applicability in, for example, analytical and critical thinking, communicative abilities, problem solving and being able to interact with others. According to Bath et al. (2004), the development of generic abilities also leads to improving knowledge and capacities specific to a discipline. In other words, intelligence and life wisdom interact with proficiency and skills.

Proven Experience as "Practice and Know-How"

In this section "proven experience" will be discussed, a concept containing many links to "own experience". It includes matters like *practice* and *training*, which leads to the development of proven experience in the sense of *know-how* or *practical knowledge*. The working life link lies close at hand. The individual experience is not only *put to proof* but is *proven* in connection with e.g. professional work or occupational training.

What then does proven experience mean? It can first be stated that there is no legal or generally accepted definition of this concept (Malmquist, 2010). One interpretation is that it has to do with somebody's *own* proven experience, acquired in working life. This interpretation makes the word "proven" more peripheral and when coupled to experience it only suggests "having the experience of a certain kind of work". This brings to light the reasoning above about perceiving someone's own experience as, for example, acquaintance with or life wisdom.

If one abandons the requirement that proven experience has to be someone's own experience, at least three alternatives remain, the common denominator being that someone has made the experience, but not necessarily individually. In the second and third alternatives the difference between "proven experience" and "own experience" is fuzzy.

To begin with, the individual does not only have experience of a certain workplace, but the experience has also been documented and evaluated afterwards. This putting to the proof has since formed the basis of subsequent actions. Ideally, the documentation has also been discussed and evaluated by others. The interpretation derives from medical science and can, according to Singer (1972), be traced as far back as Hippocrates from Kos (born ca. 460 BC).

By applying an inductive method, with repeated observations, systematic note-taking and generalizations based on experience, Hippocratic physicians did away with bizarre religious cults and the view of illness as divine persecution.

Secondly, abandoning the coupling to medical science, those who teach others, like instructors in programmes for future teachers and nurses, may apply their own or others' proven experience to their teaching. These instructors have been recruited by the university for their practically proven experience to supplement the scientific knowledge disseminated by teachers with a PhD. In this and the following case, however, the requirements on documentation, evaluation and other aspects have been toned down or even eliminated.

Thirdly, students, at least those within advanced education, are said to possess proven experience from working life. Students' workplace experience, which in the ideal case is linked to their future professions, can then be utilized as an educational resource.

In the knowledge-theoretical discussion within working life research concepts like "practice", "training", "know-how" and "practical knowledge" are used. Many thinkers draw on Wittgenstein's reasoning about "praxis", "language game" and "the unsayable". Knowledge of a special practice demands, for instance, having experience of the language game developed there (Carlgren, 1999). "Sayable" knowledge is often equated with theoretical or scientific knowledge, while "unsayable" is synonymous with "silent knowledge". The latter may in turn be divided into skills: being able to do various things, and familiarity, i.e. knowledge acquired over a long time in a trade or profession. Familiarity enables the individual to master a certain practice, by learning the silent prerequisites and experiences guiding certain actions (Gustavsson, 2000). According to Liedman (2001), familiarity is knowledge acquired through long experience, which leads to the ability to assess and interpret situations without always being able to substantiate one's conclusions in words.

Schön (1987) distinguishes between "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action". According to him, through professional practice the practitioner acquires knowledge in action, which usually functions for handling various situations. Sometimes, however, unexpected events occur which force practitioners to stop and think. They then reflect *on* their actions in retrospect. Schön also claims that they can reflect *in* the action so as to adjust it immediately if necessary. This way of acting gradually results in a greater knowledge in action. Reflection in or on action does not, however, seem to produce knowledge that is explicitly expressed and formulated. Instead, the concept of "silent knowledge" comes into focus, i.e., the practitioner acts in accordance with more or less unconscious procedures and rules which are often impossible to describe. Molander (1996) argues that Schön starts from the idea that different situations *are given* meaning and that problems arise *in* situations. In other words, it is not an expert with the support of various theories and techniques who tells others how to solve problems, but the knowledgeable practitioner who reflects, improvizes and experiments in action.

Rolf (1991) gives an account of Polanyi's "silent knowledge". When human beings act or investigate something two levels of knowledge are brought to light, the level that distinguishes and focuses, and the tools enabling this. In other words, so-called focal knowledge does not exist *per se*, but is surrounded by sensomotoric and intellectual tools functioning as silent background knowledge. The tools also comprise culturally transferred methods, theories, values and hidden assumptions. The way Gustavsson (2000) interprets Polanyi is that all knowledge has a silent, partly hidden and unspoken dimension. Knowledge is characterized by both being individual, i.e. it exists in the bodies of human beings, and by being an activity, i.e. knowledge is something explored and used. Even explicit knowledge thus contains a dimension that is implicit and silent.

While practice appears to give rise to reflected knowledge, there are also processes working in the other direction. Ellström (2001) talks about routinized action as a process where we learn gradually to perform actions automatically and without conscious cognitive control. For this reason, actions performed from routinized knowledge cannot usually be verbalized but are based on implicit knowledge. Argyris and Schön (1974) argue that routinizing, convenience, the need for security and for distancing oneself from the perspective of others contribute to preserving people's own conception of the world.

Judging by research on the concept of practical knowledge, one can distinguish at least four dichotomies to work with. The first is the difference between what is sayable and what is silent and unsayable. There seems to be something special about practical knowledge in comparison with other knowledge, which makes it impossible to verbalize parts of such knowledge.

The second dichotomy concerns conscious vis-à-vis unconscious knowledge. The practitioner develops knowledge in action, learns to handle different situations, becomes capable of mastering a certain practice, etc. While the process is mainly unconscious, the practitioner is, at least partly, conscious.

A third dichotomy is characterized by more rational reasoning, when practitioners reflect on their actions, in contrast to routinizing, which gradually results in preserving the way of acting. In other words, the practitioner is occasionally, often due to an unexpected event, capable of looking further and thinking in abstract terms about a certain situation.

The fourth dichotomy, which partly runs parallel with the third, is about the difference between theorizing about practice and commonplace theorizing. Will practical professional work lead to more advanced knowledge in comparison with practice-based knowledge formation of other kinds (like cooking or vacuum-cleaning)?

Proven experience may thus be placed in and understood from the two meanings of “own experience” as described above. On the one hand as “acquaintance with”, i.e. a commonplace and atheoretical position. It then concerns things like unsayability, unconsciousness, routinizing and commonplace theorizing. This interpretation hardly involves documenting the experience. On the other hand, proven experience may be interpreted as “intelligence, life wisdom and maturity”, i.e. things like sayability, consciousness, reflection and practical theorizing. To document such experience is a more natural procedure.

Examples

The following example is taken from an exam question in the professional education programme for future special needs teachers/special needs pedagogues at the advanced level. In the description of “Professional attitudes II” the intentions of the course are clarified, the purpose of which is to acquaint students with aim, contents, form and expected learning outcomes. The text includes the following:

The familiarity you bring along forms the basis for interpreting the contents of the education and for further developing the competence of special needs teachers.

...In this course you will continue to develop your ability to write, talk and think scientifically about research and professional practice as well as reflecting on the relation between a strict adherence to scientific standards, proven experience and self-knowledge³ in order to develop a professional attitude.

...What basic outlook lies in your innermost self or that of anyone else described by you in one of the earlier texts? (Text 9)

The course description (Text 9) invites to several interpretations, but it is at the same time complex. One indistinct feature relates to the use of the concepts of “familiarity” and “proven experience”. The latter seems to be connected with the third interpretation above, i.e., that of students bringing along their own proven experience, using it as a starting point in their education. The occurrence of “familiarity” invites the interpretation that this is something different from “proven experience”.

Another indistinct feature is that students are supposed to develop the ability to reflect on the relation between strict adherence to scientific standards, proven experience and self-knowledge. The first relation was touched upon briefly in the previous section, albeit in connection with the “own experience” concept. To further add “self-knowledge” complicates the goal of the course. Even though the formulation is taken from the Higher Education Ordinance (1993) where students in order to qualify for the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training are expected to demonstrate self-knowledge and emphatic ability”, this hardly improves conditions. How does one, for example, reflect on the relation between strict adherence to scientific standards and self-insight? Is it possibly a matter of understanding that the choice of method, theoretical approach, way of analyzing empirics, etc. is partly affected by who you are as a person? Instead, the likely reference here is to qualities like intelligence, life wisdom and maturity.

A further indistinctness concerns the formulation “lies in your innermost self” (Text 9, third paragraph), which suggests that there exists yet another component. Is this a characteristic of those who have achieved complete self-insight and have thereby reached their innermost self, or is it about something else?

³The concepts of “proven experience” and “self-knowledge” are taken from the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the former under the heading “knowledge and understanding” and the latter under “ability and skills”.

If so, how are students to be expected to arrive at this “innermost self”? According to hermeneutic reasoning, it is not even possible to arrive at one’s innermost, as this is continually changing in the light of the present.

In the last example, taken from a Master programme in pedagogy where I myself am engaged, students are expected to find a reasonable solution to an exam question formulated as follows:

Start from the literature given and relate it to your own experiences and thoughts about pedagogy as a science. Write a *reflective and argumentative text* of ca. 4 - 5 pages where you discuss your own attitude to what characterizes pedagogy as a scientific discipline in relation to the different texts. (Text 10)

This seems to imply that students have their own experience, possibly a proven one, since it relates to a Master programme. What complicates the task is that this particular experience is supposed to apply to pedagogy as a science. Who can be reasonably expected to possess such “own (proven) experience”? Perhaps a professor of pedagogy or a senior lecturer like myself, but hardly a student who has just started on a Master programme.

Discussion

The aim of this article is to illustrate the ambiguity about the “own experience” concept as well as the related expression “proven experience” by using examples taken from home assignments and other texts written by students. So far several meanings given to these concepts have been discussed. Since it is not likely that the student or the person constructing the assignments has had *one* exactly specified meaning in mind, the meaning shifts with the individual, situation or context. A further consequence is that the same person attributes partly different meanings depending on the context and that this person’s interpretations shift over time.

It also emerges that our knowledge about things like a cup or chair and not least phenomena described by adjectives representing colours or good and evil qualities is more shifting than we imagine in our everyday understanding. Categorization and conceptualization are, in other words, far from as organized the way we assume them to be, one consequence of which is that words must be understood as approximate carriers of meaning (Lakoff, 1990). Linell (2009) points to the semi-open meaning of words, or their meaning potentiality. He also agrees that naming things changes one’s thinking, in that something that is obscure and imprecise is given a stricter form. Consequently, even the words we use in dialogue with others have flexible and imprecise meanings.

Language can be seen as a tool that brings order into an immensely complicated world. However, this simplification of the world has its price in that our understanding is reduced (Pramling, 2006). While language organizes and helps us to classify things, other possible interpretations are eliminated. Descriptions of experiences thus exclude other possible spaces.

An implicit figure of thought in a large number of the arguments above is the view of language as a tool for relating to oneself and to others. This scarcely makes “own” and “proven experience” one’s own in the sense of being a product of a unique personal testimony. On the contrary, the world of the individual has been pointed out, named and linguistically limited by others. Thus experience has been dressed in a language which offers a framework of possibility. In dialogue with others the view of the experience is transformed. A parallel can be drawn to sociocultural theory, which suggests that although language and culture are historically given they are still transformed by human beings as they develop linguistically (Dysthe&Iglund, 2003). Hence, a text about someone’s own experience is not an individual exploration but is always constructed in relation to what is referred to by Linell (2009) as a context, super address, ideology or history

Moscovici (1993) goes one step further in saying that our notions, emotions, metaphors and concepts are automatically reproduced in characteristic cultural forms. We think of them continuously, and they determine the images that turn up in our consciousness when we do or say something. This means thought before sense, and conclusion before premises. More evocative examples are, according to the author, paradigmatic notions, political and religious doctrines, ethical convictions and other shared fixed ideas. Concepts like “superego”, “mental unit”, “social self”, “group mind” and “social identity” capture similar phenomena. The way Moscovici describes it is in terms of memory enriching words with an affective tonality that prevails within a specific culture.

The theoretical excursion reveals that the concepts we make use of shift, in the sense that, partly due to the context, they have no fixed meaning but their contours are fuzzy. Naturally, this also applies to “own experience” and “proven experience”, which on account of previous experiences, sympathies and antipathies are given partly different meanings. It makes sense to talk about parallel, mixed up and overlapping meanings.

Using everyday phrases, it could be described as the difficulty of “watching one’s tongue” and always knowing what one is talking about. The same word stands for several meanings that shift and change both within and between human beings.

It might be high time to abandon the exaggerated respect for one’s own and not least proven experience, which may give the experienced an exaggerated belief in the quality of their professional experiences. Probably, it is the lack of adequate theoretical concepts rather than unsayability that makes it hard to talk about one’s experience. Using words to document the knowledge process, that is when we have learnt something or other, cannot be done (and the same goes for theoretical knowledge processes). That the knowledge product, i.e. what we know and master at a certain moment of time, could not possibly be described in words does not, however, seem plausible (cf. Sellbjer, 2009).

Why are then the concepts of “own experience” and “proven experience” used? One reason may be to give authenticity to teaching in order to avoid making it entirely abstract and theoretical. This is a way of showing that the university adopts “reality” somewhere out there. Another reason is that starting from personal experiences in the sense of everybody’s absolutely unique experience may be considered as being in harmony with the notion that these are important and must be taken seriously. All people should, not least for ethical and moral reasons, be allowed to make themselves heard. Yet another related reason is that descriptions of experiences may constitute a first step towards theoretical reflection. Using students’ experiences, or life world for that matter, as a starting point diminishes the risk that dichotomies like commonplace knowledge and scientific knowledge or practice and theory turn into parallel tracks without any mutual connection. Conceivably, the studies thus also obtain a bearing on and relevance to future practical professional work.

The reason might be pragmatic; as a university lecturer I know about the difficulty of text interpretation, but I am still obliged to examine students on the course. This makes it impossible not to use concepts of the “own experience” type, just like “discuss”, “analyze” and “reflect”. There is simply no other way of constructing tasks in a somewhat condensed form or, for that matter, syllabuses, curriculums or even higher education acts.

Is it possible then for students to know which own or what proven experience is relevant in working with a specific task? If the constructors of the task hesitate, the answer will of course be in the negative. However, even if the constructors know what they want and manage to express this in a text, different students will interpret the text in different ways. This is unavoidable and must be taken into account. Students have a different command of language, their culture background differs, and so forth. They are more or less academically schooled and have a bigger or smaller supply of life wisdom. Some are deeply anchored in what is taken for granted in their culture, others are from the very start of their studies able to reflect on and distance themselves from what others and they themselves have taken for granted. These are self-evident statements, but they may be neglected when courses are to be examined.

The second interpretation of “own experience” concerned qualities like intelligence and maturity, which were coupled to ability and skill. Examples illustrated progression in these respects and parallels were drawn to generic abilities and a strict adherence to scientific standards. It may be assumed that some students have quite a few abilities of this kind even when beginning their higher education studies. For students who are initially unused to making summaries, comparing and arguing it is especially important that tasks are distinctly formulated, since their everyday language interpretation of “own experience” is likely to be “acquaintance with”. Indistinctness in this respect, in the worst case combined with few classes and little supervision, will leave these students, in a sense, without legal rights. Even though they have been admitted to a programme they have not been given adequate tools to complete it. The result will be failing examinations, or home assignments going back and forth between student and teacher.

The ambiguity of words and hence of the dialogue will cause a further complication, as we interpret what others say in the light of our previous understanding. Students will then “hear” and “read” what they have, so to speak, already decided to hear and read. This reinterpretation process is, in all likelihood, unconscious. The dialogue serves to confirming a certain degree of understanding, whereby preliminary interpretations are stabilized. What looks on the surface as reflection actually functions as the establishment of a partly erroneous understanding.

What is required here is probably training into an academic and discipline-specific writing culture, based on clear examples where both tasks and possible answers are discussed.

Blåsjö (2004) emphasizes, after following the teaching of history and economics, the importance of teachers discussing the primary intradisciplinary ways of arguing, how to express this in language, and advocates that students are given the chance to discuss with the teacher the good points and the shortcomings of each other's work. This is a form of contextual acclimatization, learning to realize what one's own experience may be worth in various contexts, such as the university, and to know when one thing or another is relevant.

One possibility is to set student texts about own and proven experience against different theoretical angles of approach, largely the way demonstrated in this text. The theory of knowledge, linguistic research and theories of reflected and routinized practice will then function as triggers to unmask our conception of the world and set silent knowledge in motion. In the best case, processes will then begin that will never be completed.

Another didactic alternative is to scrutinize one's own experiences from the starting point of how they are viewed ontologically and epistemologically by different students and teachers. Do students think that what they reproduce are factual circumstances, interpretations, reconstructions or even stories passed on from one person to another? By comparing what has been said and thus realizing that others look upon the contents differently, the road to distancing and reflection is opened.

The goal of autobiographical memory research (Birren & Schroots, 2006) is to study what people remember, which brings up the issue whether the kind of experiences people remember most often form a pattern. More quantitatively oriented memory research indicates that what we remember best are things that occurred between the ages of 10 and 30. The reason may be that different cognitive structures have become established and that a number of events of decisive importance take place within this particular age span. We are also likely to remember more of the positive events we have experienced than of the negative ones. Women tend to remember things about on school, health and family, while men's memories are more oriented towards work. The knowledge of how emotions affect what we remember is largely lacking, however.

More qualitatively directed autobiographical memory research focuses, according to Birren & Schroots (2006), for instance on the Self and on the human tendency to make seemingly logical choices in the light of present goals and values, even though the image of ourselves also includes contradictions and myths. Culturally instigated interaction not least, especially between parents and children, plays a great role for the life history we create about ourselves and what stories abound within the family, for instance. The authors also make a point of the differences between who we want to be, what we think we are like, and how we think others perceive us. In other words, this includes, despite the respectlessness enjoined upon us, sensitive material which the university teacher has to handle with care when choosing how to work with people's own experience.

To conclude: should we use own and proven experience in situations like formulating tasks? The answer is both Yes and No. "Yes", because it seems reasonable provided that the person performing the task knows what kind of experience is asked for, why it is asked for, what it is supposed to be used for, and why this has to be communicated to the students. Another condition is that students have been trained in and have seen examples of the use of own experience. In this respect, discussions with teachers and other students offer a powerful aid. "No", because it often leads the thoughts astray in students who have less experience of studying. The more experienced students are likely to refer to their own experience in much the same way as in Text 8, whether this is asked for or not. For this reason the concepts of "own experience" and "proven experience" might as well be struck from the agenda.

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