# Explicit Use of Structural Tensions in the Encounter with Academic Culture

## Learning from a Feminist Epistemological Perspective

Project coordinator
Anne-Charlotte Ek, Genusvetenskap, Malmö högskola

Carin Dackman, Genusvetenskap, Malmö högskola
Tommy Lindholm, Genusvetenskap, Malmö högskola
Margareta Melin-Higgins, Kultur och medier, K3, Malmö högskola
Pernilla Severson, Kultur och medier, K3, Malmö högskola

**Abstract**

Student groups are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Many students' social and cultural capital differs from traditional academic values, making them more reluctant to recognize themselves as valid knowledge producers. Under the motto 'Differences as a resource for learning' the project has addressed these changed conditions. The project has explicitly made use of students´ experiences and understandings. With the assistance of "transitional objects" students has been more acquainted with academic norms and skills. The methods we have employed have raised the experiences from a personal and individual level to a common and theoretically informed level. The project has generated some 'good examples' addressing how differences and impact of asymmetrical power relation in academic settings both can be acknowledged and utilized.

**Keywords**: gender/class/race, academic culture, pedagogy, feminist epistemology

**Rationale for change**
This project is collaboration between lecturers in Gender Studies (GS) and Media and Culture Studies (MCS) at Malmö University. Malmö University has a declared intention to create equal opportunities for students from different experiential, social and cultural backgrounds. Malmö, a former traditional industrial and working class city, has over the last two decades turned into an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous city, with a pronounced social and cultural segregation. Today, 80 percent of the students are recruited from the surrounding region. The proportion of students with a working class background amounts to 33 per cent and 24 per cent of the students are of non Swedish ethical background. 68 percent of the students are women – an unusually high proportion.  This is part of the setting of our project.

The student groups we meet are heterogeneous, representing a multitude of experiences. From this follows that individual differences as well as social are more visible in the academic rooms than just some few decades back.  The terms of interaction have changed, which make them both necessary and possible to address. This pedagogical challenge informed our ambition to give more students ability to value and make use of the academic tools of analysis, reflection and critical thinking. Another aspect was the tension we experienced in the interaction between the academic cultures that we as lecturers represent, and the different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that the students represent (Bourdieu, 1996, Broady, 2000, Giroux, 2004). As feminist theorists point out this corresponds to a failure to acknowledge other positions – in terms of gender, class and ethnicity – than those of privileged middle class background to be relevant in learning processes and knowledge production (Harding, 1986; hooks, 2000,2003). As some of the students social and cultural capital differed from traditional academic values, it seemed like many students had difficulties to perceive themselves as valid knowledge producers. From our point of view, those students who could be empowered the most by academic analytical tools often rejected these tools as alienating, threatening or "too academic" (Taylor, 1993).

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The main question that the project addresses is: *How can the academic rooms and tools of knowledge production be made accessible to as many kinds of students as possible?* There are differences between students, between students and teachers and between teacher colleagues. It can be differences in study skills, consequences of asymmetrical social power relations and different epistemological perspectives. These differences have often been defined as problems to be solved, or ignored.  We have instead had the pronounced ambition to view them as a resource for learning, and   have addressed them under the motto 'Differences as a resource'. Interaction, dialogue and self reflection have been at the core of our approach.

With this motto the paramount strategy of the project has been to make use of our own and the students´ experiences and understandings. The methods we have employed have tried to raise the experiences from a personal and individual level to a common and theoretically informed level. At this level, staff and students together can analyze and discuss commonalities in representations and reproductions of power relations particularly regarding gender, class and ethnicity (Weiler, 1996).  In order to create connections between students´ experiences and critical theories about how gender, class and ethnicity intersect with both power and knowledge we framed the project's aims in the following way.

(i) to make active use of the students' different experiences in the learning processes
(ii) to articulate, introduce and deconstruct the norms and criteria of the academic culture

(iii) to make efficient use of feminist epistemology and critical pedagogy in order to create cases and materials that can serve as focal points for students´ conceptual understandings and experiences in relation to the curriculum.

For many students the academic rooms, whether they be lecture halls, seminar rooms or meetings with tutors, are loaded with symbolic meanings that can both stimulate and hamper their learning process. During the project we have conducted oral and written interviews with both new and more experienced students, individually and in focus groups. According to these interviews these students seems to have sever problems decoding the actual intensions behind the curriculum. For many students, the underlying premises and expression of knowledge production in the academy have not been transparent. Questions that can be interpreted as evidence of this blurriness are: *Why are the seminars compulsory? Why is there so much to read and why do you use such complicated words? What's the point of all these theories and concepts? Why do I have to refer to other books?* We have also discovered many students to be inexperienced in reading and understanding longer texts, and having an unarticulated understanding of theoretical analysis and analytical terms. It is a major risk that these students academic skills remaining undeveloped. To many students, the origins of and differences between different research traditions and epistemological views are also unclear. Epistemological and ontological conditions are debated within the academy, but still visibly different from other forms of knowledge production. Students' lack of understanding of the basic premises of academic knowledge production leads to difficulties in expressing themselves in academic prose. For these students there is a risk that use of language, methodological choices and application of theory are based on imitation rather than being conscious and well-founded. Questions about why students have expressed themselves in a certain way may yield answers like: *I think it sounds academic,* or *Why, what's wrong?* It is clear that these students have a need to be introduced to the premises of academic prose, in which a well-founded discussion with clear questions and references to other researchers are some of the critical criteria. The approach developed, and the 'methods' in use in this project are developed with these problems and the following preconditions in mind.

We have assumed that explicitly declared criteria for academic knowledge production will make it easier and enable more students to use them. Another precondition for our project is: learning is stimulated when as many senses as possible are involved (Englund, 2006). This means that we have deliberately broaden the use of teaching methods compared to the traditional academic teaching method with its dominant verbal focus. We argue that a move beyond the verbal increases the possibilities to meet different students' different learning styles.

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On both a theoretical and conceptual level the pedagogical ideas of the project are relating to other projects and research such as: *Transforming the Texts: towards a Feminist Classroom Practice* (Taylor, 1993), *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh, 1988)– all of them discussing how to make use of tensions within the class room and how to integrate students' experiences in the learning process. In her article *Freire and Feminist Pedagogy of Difference* K. Weiler (1996) stresses the importance of addressing the lecturer's performance, the epistemological challenge in making use of the students´ experiences and finally discrimination, all three aspects crucial for the learning processes. Our understanding of which conditions that affect the learning processes has been underpinned by P. Ramsden (1992) and R. Säljö (2005) but also by questions raised in books and articles such as: *The Why, What and How to Teach Women* (1995) and *Democratic dialogue in Education – troubling speech and disturbing Silences* (2004). Our perception of academic cultures as mainly an androcentric and western practice and a field structured by gender, class and ethnicity are informed by S. Harding (1987), D. Haraway (1997), R.W. Connell (2001), Fazlhashemi (2002) and P. Bourdieu (1996).

**Background**
The five members of this project are either lecturers in Gender Studies (GS) or Media and Culture Studies (MCS). These two disciplines are both interdisciplinary, which means that we as teachers are used to see the value of both theoretical and methodological pluralism. However the structure of the student body varies between the two disciplines. The two disciplines we represent partially attracted students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The student group at MCS has a longstanding profile of ethnic Swedish middle-class, with the female students being in slight majority. The GS student group has had a more heterogeneous profile regarding ethnicity and class, but with an even more pronounced dominance of female students. The main distinction between the two disciplines might be articulated as a difference in *how* the generated analytical and critical skills are used by the students. The GS students more often apply their knowledge to their own life practice and experience than the MCS students do. The MCS students focus more on how the knowledge can generate attractive professional skills.

**Student participation and teacher awareness**
As lecturers and scholars we are well acquainted with the norms of the academic fields, but often less aware of our own performance and maintenance of these fields' central characteristics (Weiler, 1996). In order to reach a creative learning process for both teachers and students we needed to take a closer look at both our own and the students' prior conceptions of learning situations, of academic cultures and values, feminist theory of knowledge and pedagogical theories.

To guarantee the influence of the students on the project and our teaching we have actively and systematically employed different forms for input. Student participation has mainly consisted of class room assessments, individual and focus group interviews focusing on topic of encounters with academic knowledge culture, views on the teacher's role and the student's responsibility, course expectation, memory work and reflexive autobiographical descriptions of knowledge production and development. Dialogue in relation to the aim of the project and written feed back has been an important part of the project. These more specific assignments have together with the compulsory course assessments given the students an interactive influence on the project during the two years. Understanding the educational situation as a learning situation where students´ learning clearly is placed in focus, but where we as teachers are learners as well. Therefore an important aspect has been to develop our own skills and awareness in relation to the projects aim but also in line with the students feed back. This has been the strategy to maintain and develop students influence and make their contribution part of the daily routines at our both departments.

To focus on the teachers' learning has made us articulate the conditions and ambitions of teaching, and develop and adjust our own teaching practice. In this process we have focused on themes such as; expectations in relation to teachers, curriculum and co students, potential conflicts in relation to academic culture, or conflict between students, colleagues and project members. To increase our awareness of the meaning of our own actions in the class room, we engaged a drama teacher to work with us in three workshops on the theme *Guiding yourself to enable you to direct others – communication, body and conflict*. The workshops focused on connecting theoretical standpoints with our own ways of articulating and expressing ourselves, as well as the project members' different reactions to and reflections on one's own and each others styles of interaction. In this controlled situation we also learned how to receive and give critic in a in a more productive and encouraging way. As a consequence of this, and with a focus on our differences as teachers, we have worked in pairs to investigate how differences in teaching and interaction style can contribute to a more dynamic and conscious environment in the lecture and seminar room. Two teachers with different styles are

definitely better equipped to make use of a wider range of standpoints, interpretations and interaction styles in the student group.

Another method of investigating the possibilities of differences has been to sit in on each other's lectures and seminars. Afterwards we have discussed perceived strengths and short comings of both planning and performance, in relation to the intension of the lecture. The experience of working together like this in a teaching situation has been beneficial as both conscious and unconscious attitudes and actions have been made visible, articulated and discussed. One of us has in addition tried the more time-efficient method of videotaping the class room, focusing specifically on her own performance as teacher.

Parallel to our student focused activities, we have done ongoing work to clarify and theoretically anchor the three main concepts of the project: academic culture, feministic theory of knowledge, and teaching. We have done this in several ways. We have tried to broaden our competence by having our starting points challenged and critically analyzed. We have encouraged input from other academics with an interest in, and knowledge of, pedagogical questions. To achieve this we arranged a series of seminars and workshops with the theme *Differences in the Lecture Hall*. Together with our guest lecturers we exchanged experiences, which definitely broaden the complexity of how to reach the project's aims. We also initiated collaboration with two other RHU projects in arranging a national conference on the theme *Feministic Pedagogic Interventions* in August 2006, which will result in an anthology on Feminist pedagogy.

**Methods used as transition objects**

Factual and argumentative texts in the form of written assignments is the genre that students are normally expected to master in contemporary academic cultures. Above we suggested that this is a genre that few students feel confident with when they begin their studies, and the alienating feeling these texts cause among students appear to be part of the problem our project wanted to address: how to open the academic rooms for more students in the face of a broader recruitment base for academic education. A first step in the project was to broaden the concept of text as well as the concept of valid knowledge articulation to include other expressions such as memories, experiences, art, and fiction and image production. Not only does this have the benefit of increasing the possibility that the students encounter and find ways of expression that may connect to their different backgrounds, it also has the benefit of making students' conceptions explicit in an immediate, tangible, audible and/or visual form. As we have the ambition to pave the way for students to master and claim factual and argumentative texts for their own purpose we used Donald Winnicott's (1971) concept of "transitional objects" as an approximation of the kind of textual objects we wanted students to create as starting points in their learning processes. These are the "methods" used as transitional objects: *Art exhibitions, Interviewing, Collage, Quick associative-drawings, Memory-work, Self reflections and digital documentation* and *Class room assessments*. All these techniques are developed in a range of academic disciplines, as well as in other institutional settings and social movements, and should not be seen as innovative per se, but are new in our particular educational setting. What follows here is a short description of four of the methods and the way we used them. In our forthcoming publication these methods and experiences will by presented in a more elaborated way (Liber, 2008).

**Art exhibitions**: In an attempt to make expressions and conditions for the creating of meaning in general, and the academic knowledge production in particular, more visible and articulated, three groups of students visited a number of art exhibitions in the Malmö region 2005-2006: *Konstfeminism*, *God smak* and *Normen skaver*. As an example, the exhibition *God smak* addressed taste from a power

perspective. Who has built the foundation for what is commonly considered good or bad taste? What happens when our value is measured by aesthetic surface, and when this decides what group we belong to, whether it be gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality or age? The exhibition showed what part power and position play, and how esthetic choices bridge gaps between some people and create gaps between others. By comparing the concrete and tangible way the exhibition discussed the theme norm/deviation with the more abstract theoretical way that the academic world creates knowledge, the students were able to identify typical traits within the two forms of knowledge production, their respective strengths and weaknesses, as well as similarities and differences between them. This stimulated the students' ability to reflect on both the thematic content of the exhibitions and their own learning process. In order to keep the students from reducing or ignoring differences *within* each form of knowledge, the teacher actively referred back to these discussions during the remainder of the course.

**Collage:** The collage was an attempt to solve the students' frustration in relation to high brow feminist theory. For the past fifteen years, there has been an extensive theoretical development within Gender studies, with several important but not easily accessible texts, for example by the philosopher Judith Butler. Her contribution is an internal feministic critique of the unconscious heteronormativity that permeates most gender theories and research. Many students experience her as inaccessible and abstract, and they have had problems realizing how they could make use of her critic. The students get a home assignment where they are told to show, in words and images, in what situations they perceive themselves as men/women, when class becomes an aspect that influences their ability to act, what this looks like, when youth is considered an asset or an obstacle, when they feel attracted/attractive, in what situations they feel most like themselves, in what situations they feel competent and skilled, and what makes them feel that way. The collages that are produced range from self confessions with no connection to the course literature, to advanced and creative interpretations of what has contributed to the subject's own self understanding. The spontaneous reactions to the assignment have also varied, from *"This isn't kindergarten"*, to *"It's great to be allowed to do something creative"*. During the presentation at the seminar following the assignment the multitude of expressions that gender, class, sexuality and age can take on it becomes clear. The collage has helped students to understand how identities are multiple and intersected by ascribed categories, tied to different times and places, constantly changing through life. At the same time, many students become aware that what they thought were unique, individual thoughts, rather are incorporated collective notions shared with many of the other students. This makes it possible to see and discuss the power of discourse. (Forth coming *"Varför måste Butler vara så jävla akademisk?" En diskussion om pedagogik och feministisk kunskapsteori i möte med akademisk utbildningskultur* i Tidskriften för Genusvetenskap 2007:4).

**Interviews as a method to open the door to different epistemological space**: One of the courses in Gender studies has knowledge production in Natural Sciences in focus. Many of the students have no or very limited background knowledge of the natural sciences, and many are alienated from, critical to, but also overly respectful towards the natural sciences as a field of knowledge. They have difficulties making a connection between their own lives and the consequences of the strong position the natural sciences hold in society and the academic world. This is the very connection that the course wants to address.

The students were assigned to interview people in their personal surroundings about their view on and understanding of natural sciences from a societal perspective, and in groups prepare a presentation focusing on interesting themes they had found. The interviews became a way of trying

to help the students discover the role that natural sciences play in society and how the field's production of knowledge influences their own and other people's lives. The assignment was the starting point of the course, and became a common frame of reference to relate discussions to during the course. An example of how the students analyzed the results of their interviews is the dividing into categories like: the ecologist, the chemist, the feminist and the pessimist. By doing this, they made visible different approaches to and understandings of natural sciences they had found in their personal environment. Others chose to focus on the connection between different views and social categories like gender, class/educational background and age. In this way classical sociological analytical approaches were addressed, opening for a methodological discussion and a critical examination of how well-known social categories both create and confirm differences between social groups.

**Quick associative-drawings:** We used this as a didactic means to address unconscious and immediate meanings that different students associate with important concepts of a lecture. The exercise was simple, created an engaged class room situation and managed to quickly articulate the spontaneous understanding of complicated concepts. This method can be used in a variety of situations. The teacher presents different words to the students, who are given 15 seconds to capture the concept using only dots and lines on a piece of paper. They are encouraged not to think, but to draw the movement the concept immediately evokes. These unpretentious drawings are then used in small groups, where the students examine and discuss differences and similarities between the individual drawings. In this exercise the students managed to capture their own understanding of concepts like 'student', 'academy', 'artist', 'male' and 'female', while at the same time being able to understand and discuss how these concepts are joined or separated by association. Often these associations are cultural typical, and even stereotypical, but they can also be individual interpretations. The method was used in the introduction course at CMS, during a module about different learning strategies. The drawings were saved, and later used during a lecture about the relation between theory and practice. The drawings of the concepts 'artist' and 'scientist' were used to remind and establish a connection between the theme of the lecture and the students' earlier associations.

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Our experiences of trying to broaden text and using transitional objects are all in all positive. The tensions between different experiential backgrounds were addressed and contributed with new and different experiential material relevant for the participants. In that way the more theoretical content of both disciplines were enriched, made more specific and more in line with contemporary social situations represented by students experiences. Students as well as project members became both more aware and engaged, the conditions of knowledge production less abstract and more transparent. Dialogue and feed back became an efficient tool for developing and adjusting didactic aspect during the course. This was highly valued by the student since many have experiences of evaluations and feed back having no impact.

**Conclusions and reflections**

Have we fulfilled our ambition with the project? Have more students come to see themselves as legitimate producers of knowledge? and have they become more skilled in analysis, reflection and critical thinking? The answer is, in the best of academic tradition, both yes and no. The scope of the project has in many ways been fruitful and stimulating for both students and teachers. The cooperation between the faculties have given birth to interesting comparisons, and have illuminated the complexity of our ambition with the project – to see differences as a resource for learning. Our understanding of differences is more complex today than it was at the beginning of the project, both

theoretically and practically. Making use of an economic concept one can say that there is a lot invested in these manifestations of differences and a lot of resistance to examining the conditions that underpins these differences. To change them demand both willingness to self critical reflection and an open attitude give up privileges. Working with the motto 'making differences into a resource' demands the will, courage and ability to handle one's own resistance, as well as the conflicting interests that arise. In this project, different experiences and conditions among students and between colleagues have been made visible and explicitly examined. Despite this resistance, we argue that by addressing differences, we create possibilities for an increased awareness of the connections between one's own experience and views, theories and larger processes in society. At the same time, it is important to actively avoid that these differences are perceived as manifest and impossible to influence, or that the descriptions and examples used reduce individuals and groups to a handful of stereotypes. As teachers we have the responsibility to show that categories like man/woman, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, artist/scientist and young/old change over time, depending on where, when and by who they are used, and that due to class, ethnicity, age and sexual preferences, the differences within the group 'women' are at least as big as those between the groups 'women' and 'men'.

In our everyday dialogue with students, in the more formal focus group discussions, in the class room and course assessments as well as in a number of other forms of written reflections, there is visible evidence that the students now in a more explicit and balanced way than before are able to discuss the core of our project i. e. the tension the encounter with academic culture creates. As teachers we have found better ways of using the students' own experiences in relation to the contents of the courses, something that generally is appreciated by the students themselves. We have been able to connect the application of theory and understanding of concepts to specific experiences. Students' work has become more theoretical and critically reflecting on knowledge production and has thereby at the same time become more specific. Both in concrete classroom situations and through memory work (Widerberg, 1995) we have cooperated with student groups in examining and creating contexts that stimulate different styles of learning and been able to connect this with academic norms, expressions of knowledge and space. In this way we made the students aware of how the conditions of learning and teaching can be both hindered and stimulated by the shape and style of the room, the expressions of interaction (transmission, dialogue, discussion), but also which forms of expression that are legitimate, marked by status, and which are seen as illegitimate.

To what extent these experiences will have a lasting impact on the students' learning is hard to tell. But they have definitely been appreciated in the moment, and contributed to a safe and sound environment where demands and expectations have been articulated. This clarity has spurred some students to go beyond their usual way of speaking and expressing themselves. For others, it has generated a better trust in their own ability to succeed in their academic studies. The academic way of thinking no longer seems as something fundamentally different from their own. For the project members this experience has meant that we today more actively choose lecture or seminar room in relation to the size of the student group, the frame, content and theme of the course. We also actively strive to make the criteria and norms within our respective disciplines explicit, and to find a common understanding and articulation of these criteria and norms within the faculty group. From this perspective, adjusting to the Bologna convention have contributed in a positive way, with its demands for explicit course goals regarding standards, skills and ability to apply them.

One of the insights that our own learning process has generated is, that difficulties might not mainly be related to our encounter with the students. The Academy's institutional setting and organizational setting might be just as important. 'Lack of time' was a recurrent theme when trying to

coordinate our project with colleges. Gradually, 'time' became a theme that we actively and consciously examined. We became aware that when 'time' was used as an argument, it could contain lack of interest among colleges and staff  or resistance to change, but also be due to overwhelming workload coursed by ever ongoing organizational changes and evaluations. In a organization where the symbolic capital of research are more valued then pedagogical merits time has become an acceptable argument for not giving pedagogy much attention. Maybe it is understandable due to the drastic organizational changes that transform today's academy.  Never the less it is unsatisfactory from a pedagogical perspective and most important it is unsatisfactory from a democratic perspective. Student are entitled to be given the same options for learning and that demand acknowledging that differences due to socioeconomic and cultural condition need to be addressed in our academic room.

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**Author Note**

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Anne-Charlotte Ek
Flervetenskapliga institutet
Hämtställe 71
Malmö högskola
205 06 MALMÖ

Anne-Charlotte.Ek@ts.mah.se
040- 665 75 42
070-273 00 66