ACTION (RE)CALL IN THE THEATRE CLASSROOM, SWEDEN

Pernilla Ahlstrand

The Swedish curriculum

In Sweden, theatre is an artistic subject at upper secondary level and part of the national aesthetic programme. The last two curriculum reforms in Sweden have introduced new ways to (re)present the content of schooling. The new version of the syllabus is organized in relation to content areas as well as subject-specific capabilities for the students to develop. This change of how the curriculum texts are formulated can be regarded as expressing the shift in teaching situations from a focus on knowledge (in terms of subject matter) to a focus on ways of knowing (subject-specific capabilities) (Carlgren et al., 2015). Previous research in the field has pointed out the difficulties in describing knowledge-specific aspects of the central capabilities of theatre as a school subject (cf. McCammon & Österlind, 2011; Winner et al., 2013). The action (re)call research method can be a way to research subject-specific capabilities in the way we have used it in previous research projects. Even though this research was conducted in theatre-oriented settings, action (re)call also demonstrated the potential to be used in a broader drama-based context. It is a method that has the potential to ‘catch’ transient ways of knowing which are expressed in a physical form.

Background-stimulated recall

The action (re)call method is a development of the stimulated recall method (Haglund, 2003). While stimulated recall is used as a research method outside the classroom, action (re)call focuses on knowledge in action, inside the classroom. In short, stimulated recall uses filmed material from, for example, a teaching situation. The film is used as stimuli when interviewing either the teacher and/or the students after the teaching situation. The method developed from it, action (re)call, makes it possible for the teacher and/or the students to ask questions in direct relation to the situation. The researcher is permitted to intervene and stop the teaching situation to respond in the moment.
The developed method – action (re)call

The action (re)call method was developed when I was collecting the empirical material in relation to my dissertation (Ahlstrand, 2014). It was tried out (Ahlstrand, 2015) and improved in subsequent research projects (Ahlstrand, 2020). In the 2015 research project, the assignment being observed was the creation of a stage production. The rehearsals were video-recorded. This was in a theatre teaching practice in upper secondary school. The interventions that occurred in the rehearsal process of the stage production were studied. During the rehearsals, situations arose in which the teacher intervened in the ongoing process. The teacher stopped the rehearsal based on identified difficulties with student performance. In action (re)call, these situations are called didactic interventions. On the occasion of a didactic intervention, the researcher puts questions to teachers and students regarding the choices made in immediate connection with the intervention. Results from the research project are reported in Ahlstrand (2020).

Analysing the material

In order to develop in-depth knowledge of what is happening at the time of didactic interventions, interaction analyses are used (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Interaction analyses are part of the conversation analytic field and focus on physical actions. The analyses make it possible to articulate subject-specific capabilities central to planning teaching activities in a systematic way. This involves working with feedback strategies and assessment. The epistemological point of departure for action (re)call is a non-dualistic, relational, and practice-based view of knowledge (Carlgren, 2015; Polanyi, 2009). This knowledge is, to a large extent, tacit in both embodied (Polanyi, 2009) and practice-based (Wittgenstein, 1974) meaning. It can be described as knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983), and the knowing must somehow be relieved from the action in order to become visible and articulated.

“Lazier and more precise”

In the spring of 2020, the action (re)call method was applied in a new way. Instead of using it in a rehearsal process at an upper secondary school, the method was used in relation to a movement class at the theatre teacher training programme at Gothenburg University in Sweden. The teacher was giving instructions at the same time as the group of 13 students was working physically on the floor. The teacher himself worked within the group. Several times the teacher asked the group to search for a special quality, namely “lazier”. He said, for example: “See if you can give yourself permission to be even lazier”. He also put this descriptive word together with another comparative adjective: “more precise”. After 20 minutes of physical work, the researcher (Ahlstrand) took the opportunity to intervene and ask a question in relation to the expression “lazier and more precise”. The group had until now been making a common rhythmical pattern with their feet and moving in different directions in a big common circle, facing each other. They had also been imitating each other’s movement patterns while moving in different directions in the room.

TEACHER: Ok. Feet cooperate against the floor. Get power from floor to knee, create life, you work together with the floor. Again, can I be lazy and precise? Researcher: How can you be lazy when you move as fast as you do?

Unlike the way the action (re)call method had been used before, with the action freezing, the group continued to work physically and still answered the researcher’s question. The
Action (re)call in the theatre classroom

The different students gave varying explanations to what it meant for them to be “lazy”. One student said, for example, that being “lazy” was about “not wasting energy, that if I am going somewhere, in a certain way, then I do it and do not do a lot of other things. So, everything that is not needed, I can remove”. Another student commented: “I let the impulse control me and not put energy into deciding in advance where I am going”. A third student replied: “I intend not to work towards directions but to follow the directions”. Seven students answered, and all the answers had, in some way, to do with not using too much energy in the situation.

Here an important possibility arises when working with the action(re)call method. The researcher can encourage both the teacher and the students to elaborate and articulate what a specific quality can “stand for”. The teacher can then both see in the student’s movements whether they are working with the quality as they described it, and, at the same time, get to know how the students are thinking about and interpreting the qualities that the teacher is using. The teacher is likely to have a clear idea of what “lazier and more precise” looks like, but do the students have the same “picture”? It is common in a theatre teaching practice to reflect after doing a specific exercise; here the point is to reflect in action. This is a development of the way the method was used in the previously mentioned research project (Ahlstrand, 2020) when researching subject-specific capabilities, where qualities involved in the capability where articulated. With the described situation above as an example, the action re(call) method makes it possible to go deeper into one specific quality.

Risks

One thing to draw attention to in this specific example was that the researcher did not pay attention to receiving answers to the question from all students. It would have strengthened the material if space had been given for the different opinions of all the students about the quality “lazy”. After seven students had replied, the teacher continued with his instructions. Out of the 13 students, not everyone answered. This can be understood under the circumstances – they were running their movement class at the same time – but still the researcher could have made space for all students to answer. Another risk one should be aware of when using this method for research is that material may be difficult to collect. In the case of this movement class, some of the material was inaudible due to the fact that the students were working physically while answering the question. Action (re)call encourages and helps facilitate the “reflection-in-action” but can pose a problem like this to be solved in other similar situations. It would not have been justifiable to put microphones on every student, considering the costs, but one way to have solved both the problems, in this case, of getting all the students to answer and of making their answers audible, would have been to have the group members pass around one microphone.

A third risk that became apparent in this situation, and may in fact be likely to happen in others, is the fact that the teacher never answered the question himself. This highlights the
argument for the utility and necessity of the method to structure the collection of responses. In the movement class studied, the teacher went on with his instructions after seven students had answered the question. Looking back on the situation, we can infer that the teacher had decided there had been “enough talking”, and the physical work, which was the purpose of the teaching, needed to continue. But the situation also made it obvious that, for the teacher, the students’ answers “were enough”. The teacher himself did not need to answer, either because he was satisfied with the students’ answers or because he saw no point in “correcting” the answers. The researcher could have stopped the teaching one more time to ask the teacher to answer, but, at that time, the researcher took the decision not to interrupt the teaching situation once more.

Potential possibilities

If the researcher and the teacher had had the chance to continue to work together, more possibilities with the method could have been elaborated. For instance, the example with the quality “lazier and more precise” could have been the starting point for planning a new teaching situation in which the students would have had the possibility to work on the quality even more deeply. What aspects of the student’s answers could be tried out together on the floor? If and when the teacher becomes more confident with the method, there is the prospect that the teacher himself could stop and give the possibility to investigate a specific quality that is asked for. It was actually the teacher who had invited the students to answer, which also can be seen as a development of the method, and this practice and its potential can be further investigated.

There is another promising possibility that could be further explored. If the students were encouraged to stop the teaching situation when they perceived that the teacher was taking a concept or a quality for granted, the students themselves could be more involved in using the method. In that sense, they would also become more empowered in the situation. In a theatre teaching practice, it is common to give students time to reflect after rehearsing or after an exercise. This is of course still a possibility. But the point with action (re)call is to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1983). There is a risk when reflecting after something that aspects of the phenomenon are lost or that things are facilitated, corrected, or even forgotten.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that teachers, take certain qualities in their students’ performances for granted. Tacit, taken-for-granted knowledge is, to a large extent, ‘tacit’ in embodied (Polanyi, 2009) as well as practice-based (Wittgenstein, 1974) meaning. Tacit knowledge can be described as knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983); the knowing must somehow be relived from the action in order to become visible and articulated. The action (re)call method creates a possibility to relive the knowing from the action that is occurring in the teaching situation.

In a teaching situation, it is necessary to re-live and articulate the knowledge involved in actions, not least because it can be beneficial for the student’s learning and development. Differentiated grades are applied in both Swedish upper secondary schools and at teacher training education at university level, which means that teachers need to communicate their basis for their assessments.
References


