

Congress Report:

Civics and citizenship education in the Nordic Conference on Subject Didactics NoFa-5, May 26–28, 2015, Helsinki, Finland

On May 26–28, 2015, the University of Helsinki acted as the host for the fifth Nordic Conference on Subject Didactics. For historical reasons the Nordic societies have in a global view remarkably intimate contacts with each other. Short distance, affinities of cultural and political traditions, and the density of social networks between them since centuries back in time have conduced to vibrant Nordic collaboration in the number of fields ranging from politics and economy to science and education. This is visible also in the governmental and non-governmental networks in educational sciences. A recent example of this collaboration are the Nordic conferences on subject didactics, the first of which took place in Oslo, in 2007. The conferences are held every second year, and the previous hosts have been Middelfart (Denmark, 2009), Karlstad (Sweden, 2011), and Trondheim (Norway, 2013).

The Nordic conferences on subject didactics are referred to as NoFa conferences (e.g. NoFa-5). The abbreviation stems from the Norwegian words 'Nordisk Fagdidaktikk', Nordic subject didactics. The meaning and the connotations of the term 'didactics' in the English-speaking world are a little different from what they are in the Nordic and German-speaking world. In the latter, didactics also covers questions that relate to the social, political, cultural and psychological contexts of education and teaching. In the NoFa conferences the themes also often go well beyond classroom walls and teacher–student interaction in a formal school setting. Nordic researchers on subject didactics may often prefer using the word 'education' rather than 'didactics' when speaking of their field of study in English (e.g. 'history education', not 'history didactics'). Yet in the NoFa conferences the term 'subject didactics' probably will continue to prevail.

The title of the NoFa-5 conference was 'Changing Subjects, Changing Pedagogies: Diversities in School and Education'. The title was deliberately ambiguous and could be interpreted as an invitation to discuss changes as well as actions that bring about changes. As the conference program said, also Nordic societies face new challenges relating to social and cultural diversity. These actualise the need of new solutions in teaching and education. One can also argue that in theories and methods of teaching and learning there is now diversity that goes to the heart of traditional structures and arrangements in school, for example in questions of interdisciplinarity and 'ubiquity of learning'.

Linguistic diversity in the NoFa-5 was smaller than in the previous NoFa conferences because the conference language was now English. It was a departure from the policy of mandating Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and 'Scandinavian' as the first languages in Nordic conferences. Perhaps due to the new arrangement, the number of delegates reached an all-time NoFa record,

with 350 participants from the Nordic countries and beyond: c. 250 papers were presented in 77 sessions in 13 parallel streams. The book of abstracts can be found in the conference homepage, <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/nofa5-2015/programme-2/> (read Nov 20, 2015).

Research on civics/citizenship education: topics and methods

The number of sessions and papers on civics/citizenship education was rather modest: two sessions and five papers were under the title 'civics education'. Themes relevant to civics education were discussed also in other sessions, notably on history teaching, global education and education for sustainable development, and in two sessions, with altogether seven papers, that were titled 'Remaining national perspectives on history and civics teaching'. Coinciding conferences sometimes cause participation to drop, however I think the modest number of contributions on civics education in the NoFa-5 was not exactly surprising: research in this field is not particularly well resourced in the Nordic countries. In the Nordic countries civics/social studies has often had close ties with history teaching, hence researchers on civics education often do research on history education as well, and in fact the latter may often be their primary expert area. It is typical of the close ties between the two disciplines that after the NoFa-4 (2013) conference articles based on papers in history education and in civics education were published as one book (Lise Kvande, ed., *Faglig kunnskap i skole og lærerutdanning. Nordiske bidrag til samfunnsfag- og historiedidaktikk*. Bergen, Fagbokforlaget, 2014).

Let it also be noted that Nordic specialists in subject didactics also congregate in other discipline specific Nordic conferences outside the NoFa context. For example history didactics specialists have arranged sessions in Nordic history conferences (Nordiska historikermöte). However civics and citizenship education didactics has had relatively few connections with the more 'hardcore' social sciences in those circumstances.

Yet the range of topics in the contributions on civics education in NoFa-5 witnesses of alertness of Nordic researchers with regard to contemporary concerns in education and in society at large. The papers addressed for example the issues of citizenship and nationality in the age of transnational governance (Kjetil Børhaug), nation-building in the age of history wars (Bengt Schüllerqvist), connections between political trust and national identity and citizenship education (Hans Löden), and current representations of global economy in textbooks (Pia Mikander). How social studies has (re)produced relationship between the individual and society was analysed also historically (Henrik Åström Elmersjö). One step closer to the classrooms, the challenge of teaching social studies in ethnically diverse classrooms

(Katarina Blennow) and teaching the European Union and EU citizenship (Karen Marie Hedegaard & Carsten Linding Jakobsen) was also discussed. All these themes are relevant to our understanding of the expectations directed to civics and citizenship education, and also the social, cultural and political parameters within which civics teaching and citizenship education takes place.

Relating more directly to the processes of learning and teaching and teacher-student interaction there were papers discussing the relation between students' reasoning and civic teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Malin Tväråna), how learning aims in social studies education are put forward in the curriculum (Anders Stig Christensen), what kinds of teaching approaches, learning activities and forms of evaluation civics teachers use and how they justify them (Siv Eie & Marit Storhaug), and what teachers focus on in their feedback to students in social studies (Robert Kenndal, Lauri Kuru & Daniel Larsson). Comparative studies might be relatively easily feasible, considering the already mentioned close ties and affinities between the Nordic societies, however among these papers only one (Anders Stig Christensen) had an explicitly comparative dimension.

The papers show a reasonably wide variety of methodologies. There are papers which analyse qualitatively textbooks (Börhaug, Mikander), historical sources of authorities' assessment of textbooks (Åström Elmersjö), curricular texts (Anders Stig Christensen), conversations between student and teacher (Kenndal, Kuru & Larsson) or interviews with students (Tväråna). Also a survey (Eie & Storhaug) and classroom observations (Blennow) were

used. One of the projects presented could be characterised as action research (Hedegaard & Linding Jakobsen).

Many of the afore mentioned presenters have during the years also contributed to the Nordidactica which is a Nordic Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education (www.kau.se/nordidactica), thus there is some stability in the research circles, albeit narrow, in the Nordic countries in civics and citizenship education. The researchers in civics and citizenship education in the NoFa-5 had a meeting during the conference in Helsinki where prospects of concerted activities in future conferences were discussed. The next NoFa conference, NoFa-6, with title 'Interplay between general and subject specific knowledge about teaching and learning in school and teacher education. Perspectives and challenges', will take place in Odense, Denmark, 29–31 May, 2017 (http://www.sdu.dk/en/Om_SDU/Institutter_centre/lkv/Konferencer+og+seminar/Konferencer+2017/NOFA+6). It was envisaged that civics and citizenship education will be visible in Odense, and already next year, in 2018, a symposium or a conference in the field could take place in Bergen. There is relevant research being done at various university institutions in the Nordic countries, and now it is important to intensify the contacts between researchers or research units. It would also be fruitful if researchers from within 'hardcore' social sciences (sociology, political science, etc.) were drawn more into discussion on civics/social studies/citizenship education.

Jan Löfström, University of Helsinki

