

## Book Review

**Blennow, Katarina (2019). The Emotional Community of Social Science Teaching. Lund/Sweden: Lund Studies in Educational Science, 272 pp. Open source publication, ISBN-13: 9789188899637**

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„What do emotions do in Social Science teaching and what does the subject Social Science do to emotions?“ These are the fundamental questions, which Katarina Blennow pursues in her dissertation "The Emotional Community of Social Science Teaching" (2019, p. 15). Only in recent years has the influence of emotions appeared on the map of Social Science didactics. In a field which still has not been comprehensively researched, Blennow's work promises to be very useful for navigation – as it provides a unique theoretical framework that proves fruitful for empirical explorations. Through her ethnographic case studies at four upper secondary schools in Sweden from April 2014 to December 2015 Blennow documents how various "emotional communities" are built by students and teachers.

The explorative studies show how the teaching of Social Science can spark emotions in the encounter of students, teachers and controversial content: In a lesson on international law a girl with personal experiences of war does not voice her anger but reflects the theoretical lecture as naive "crap" in an interview conducted weeks later (p. 13). In a lesson about the terror attacks on the magazine "Charlie Hebdo" a student expresses his opinion and is confronted by a "mob" of classmates who deem themselves to be good citizens (p. 210). In a lesson on failing governments the teacher dismisses the example brought forward by a student as too far away even though the student shows that his own example is of personal relevance to him (p. 137).

"Emotional communities" and symbolic borders are built in all of these situations. Sometimes these borders are visible – when all students with an immigrant background sit separated on one side of the classroom or in another school the popular students sit as a group at the front. Other borders are built simultaneously by students and teachers expressing or withholding their opinions and feelings. Blennow shows that the teaching of Social Sciences creates content-specific emotional communities that are different from other subjects such as History or Religious Education.

Blennow's book is clearly structured with each chapter merging into a pointed conclusion that enables the reader to swiftly grasp the complex and yet striking findings of her studies. Starting with a review of the previous research on emotions, education and Social Science didactics (Chapter 2), Blennow unfolds the theoretical background (Chapter 3). As Blennow emphasizes her theory is mainly inspired by Barbara

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Rosenwein's concept of "Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages" (Rosenwein, 2006) and Sara Ahmed's "Cultural Politics of Emotions" (Ahmed, 2014).

One major achievement of Blennow's book is that its underlying theories – which do not come from or are established in educational science – are combined into a fruitful framework that serves as an instrument for Blennow's own empirical studies as they are reflected in Chapter 4 and as they are described in the chapters 5 through 9. Blennow begins with the presentation of the schools and teachers involved (Chapter 5), discusses how emotive topics and gatekeeping influence Social Science teaching (Chapter 6), which leads over to the detailed analysis of how teachers' views on emotions and their professionalism influence the emotional community in the classroom (Chapter 7). The research on the teachers is convincingly complemented with an analysis of situations in which emotional expression is withheld by the students (Chapter 8) and situations where tensions are voiced (Chapter 9). In the concluding chapter Blennow summarizes her findings and outlines the implications for teaching, teachers' education and further research.

Blennow carefully analyses the different cases along Sara Ahmed's concepts of movement, attachment and contact. The repeated pattern makes her argumentation easy to follow and enables the reader to draw their own conclusions on the questions why, how and when emotions are expressed. One conclusion might be that students withhold their emotions if they fear that their utterance might move them away from their classmates to whom they are attached. The "relational character of emotions" shows clearly throughout the different case studies: Emotions have a strong impact on how the students come into contact with the subject matter. In this context Blennow (p.71) refers to Ahmed's concept of impression as something that leaves by contact a mark on your surface, therefore shapes you and the way you approach others.

One of Blennow's central findings is that emotions in Social Science do not stand in the way of learning but can on the contrary foster understanding of a certain subject content. Therefore it seems necessary that students voice their feelings which is often not the case as the above mentioned examples show. In order to encourage more students to speak out Blennow urges for the traditional division between rationality and emotionality to be overcome: "Both students and teachers give the impression that they are not used to talking about feelings in Social Science teaching [...] emotions are not seen as an integral part of the subject. Yet they are there, often evoked by the knowledge content of the subject and they undoubtedly do something to the teaching and learning" (Blennow, 2019, p. 224).

At the same time Blennow points out that a certain topic such as migration or international law is not emotional per se but becomes emotionally charged – or "sticky" as Ahmed calls it – by the contemporary discourse in society. Therefore current events and the specific set of relations in a student group have a strong influence on what is considered to be "emotive" – a term that Blennow borrows from the historian and cultural anthropologist William Reddy (2001, p. 128) who defines it as a speech act expressing feelings and thus describing and changing the social world. In other words: There are no universal emotions and the boundary work within a certain emotional community is permanently under construction with the borders itself being "porous" and "overlapping" (Blennow, 2019, p. 61).

This calls for more qualitative research to be done as Blennow resumes: Her empirical case studies rely strongly on verbal expression although some discourse exclusions are performed bodily as in the case of a teacher turning only reluctantly to a student who makes an emotionally charged objection. Some situations are video recorded and played back to the students before they are interviewed. Other situations are only described on the basis of field notes and the memories of those involved – a circumstance that is convincingly reflected and justified by Blennow. It even leads to striking insights into what is remembered long after a heated debate: In the case of the conflict about the attack on "Charlie Hebdo" the students were weeks later still very well aware of the emotions expressed in that situation and assume that the teacher wanted to restore order, but do not recount what the teacher said. In fact the teacher wanted to widen the perspective on the topic – what according to Blennow's findings could have been done more

effectively by relating to emotions instead of the commonly used analytical teaching approach that is keeping a lid on emotions.

An interesting finding of Blennow's study is that students oftentimes don't see teachers as the main gatekeepers in the process of Social Science teaching, who determine how a student gets in touch with a certain subject matter. Instead the student interviews show that it is the prospect of what other students might think of them and how it will effect their relation which determines what a student might say or not say. This finding underlines that emotions are relational which means that they are not within a person but are constantly constructed between people and therefore shaping and shaped by our interactions (p. 70).

Surprisingly it can be seen as a chance when a teacher is not too closely attached to the emotional community of the students as the teacher's interventions seem to be not so much of a threat as the possible reaction of the fellow students. The teacher in the above mentioned discussion about the attacks on "Charlie Hebdo" considers but in the end refrains from sharing his own feelings with his class, although it could have helped the class to understand the emotional relevance of the situation. This rational approach does not resonate with his students as the interviews demonstrate: whereas the emotions are clearly remembered and even felt again, the rational information is lost or misinterpreted.

Blennow focuses in all analysed cases on "strong emotions" such as anger or fear because she identifies "conflictuality" as the core concept of Social Science teaching. This leaves the seemingly "weaker" but assumingly not less influential cognitive passions such as awe, wonder, boredom or curiosity for researchers to come. Overall Blennow's book draws out the map of an important field for further explorations and experiments. Social Science didactics still have to overcome the division between rationality and emotionality and thereby help teachers to be more open towards emotions. Or in the summarizing words of Blennow (2019, p. 236): "The complexity revealed in this study indeed adds to a notion of Social Science teaching as both difficult and joyous, demanding a certain amount of courage."

## REFERENCES

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