

The didactic theory of Wolfgang Klafki

The early Klafki

Categorial education

The starting point of Klafki's didactic thinking is an analysis of different kinds of theories on the nature of education. How does education actually come about? Klafki refuses both formal and material theories (i.e. theories that focus on either the learner or the content), outlining his own alternative: The categorial theory of education (Klafki 1975).

Klafki's basic assumption is that man needs categories in order to understand both the physical and cultural world and life as such. Without categories there is no understanding at all. One of the major tasks, then, is to find the best and most appropriate categories in order to develop the understanding of the learners. The ambition of categorial education is to gain both knowledge, skills and experiences by introducing the learners to new categories, i.e. new ways of understanding the world and human and personal life. Thus, learning itself is considered an experience.

Crucial to Klafki's theory is the importance the studied material may have for the learner's present and future life and the topicality of the material. In what ways does the material relate to contemporary society and culture? In Klafki's opinion, what is common is not universal. What is common is what is to be found in the present.

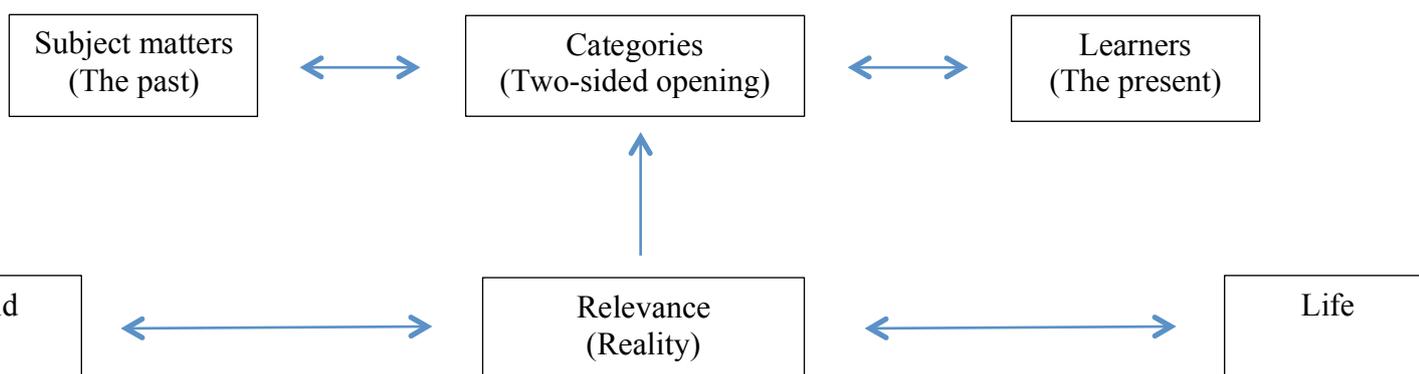
In his early writings, Klafki primarily uses history and history teaching as examples. Historical knowledge is considered "a source for the present", and history should only be part of the curriculum to the extent that it actually deepens and facilitates our understanding of the present.

The question Klafki's theory of categorial education poses to the teacher is: What categories are suitable when it comes to creating an opening of both central parts of a given subject as well as the learner?

The point is that the teacher has to seek the categories, the issues and the material that may create the necessary relation between these opposed elements of the learning process. The learning process consists of both, but how do we ensure that they both are present in education?

One of Klafki’s primary aims is to provide criteria which enable the teacher to select relevant material for the educational process. This addresses the problems of the enormous amount of information and knowledge in our present day society. How is one to make one’s way in this jungle? Selection criteria must be looked for in all other subject matters. We cannot teach the pupils everything – or a little bit of everything – about everything. The most relevant parts have to be chosen.

Figure 1: The learning process as categorial education



Lesson planning

Klafki coins his theory in to five questions in regard to the teacher’s planning. These questions as a whole form the core of the didactical analysis. One may also argue that they represent the criteria for both choosing and working with different kinds of content. It is worth mentioning that the concept of content is dynamic as it changes. Content is one thing in the first question, another in the second question and yet another in the third and the fourth question.

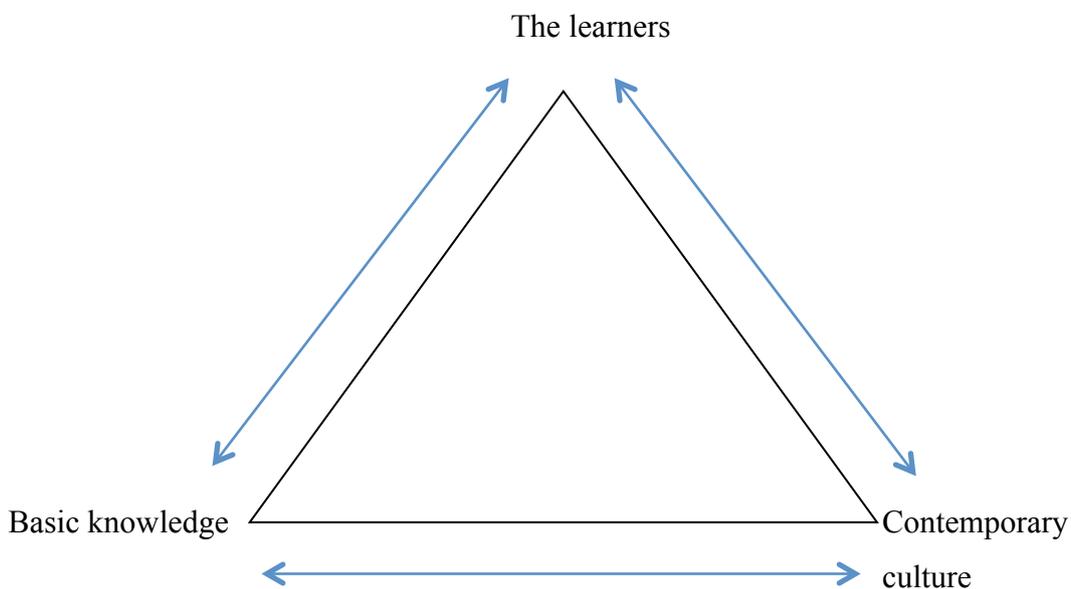
Figure 2: The five questions in regard to lesson planning (Klafki 2000)

I	What wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner? What basic phenomenon or fundamental principle, what law, criterion, problem, method, technique, or attitude can be grasped by dealing with these contents as "examples?"
II	What significance does the content in question, or the experience, knowledge, ability or skill to be acquired through this topic already possess in the minds of the children in my class? What significance should it have from a pedagogical point of view?
III	What constitutes the topic's significance for the children's future?
IV	How is the content structured (which has been placed in a specifically pedagogical perspective by questions I, II and III)?
V	What are the special cases, phenomena, situations, experiments, persons, elements of aesthetic experience, and so forth, in terms of which the structure of the content in question can become interesting, stimulating, approachable, conceivable, or vivid for children of the stage of development of this class?

How Klafki may be used in subject matters

In my own teaching I have developed a model to illustrate one way of using Klafki's general approach in an RE context (Skovmand 2004: 160ff.).

Figure 3: Klafki adapted to RE by Skovmand



The three elements of the model represent what the teacher (basically in any subject) has to consider when planning his or her classroom activities. "Basic knowledge" refers to the knowledge required by the teacher in order to make him or her able to select relevant parts of "the knowledge system of

the subject”. “Contemporary culture” refers to the ways in which the issue in question is perceived in modern, contemporary culture. This investigation involves statistical data about the religiosity of adults, youngsters and children, and a variety of cultural manifestations (music, literature, paintings etc.). “The learners” refer to the pupils or students’ previous qualifications (knowledge and skills) and ways of thinking.

The fundamental thing about this model is that the teacher has to consider all possible relations between the three elements, and that any issue or category may be critically examined.

One has to make a clear distinction between religious concepts and RE concepts. The concepts – or categories – of different religious traditions, theology and religious studies are not necessarily useful when it actually comes to teaching. Take for instance the issue, concept or category “salvation”. This is a key concept in both theology and religious studies, but should it be taught (or used) in schools? I argue “no” or “not necessarily so”, as the category is far too abstract to enable interrelations between the learners and the material studied, and as the contemporary conception of the category will relate to the religious field in a narrow manner. Instead, I suggest an alternative category: heaven. The advantages of this didactic strategy seem evident. Heaven is a concrete place (the place of ultimate salvation), heaven is a commonly used metaphor in varying forms of modern art (be it literature, painting, music or films) and, finally, heaven (i.e. the sky¹) is something children easily can relate to.

Thus, my son presented a fully equipped mythology of the “himmel” to me when he was only 3 years old. It consisted of a man named Holger who lived in the “himmel” in a blue tent. Holger thought it was a house but my son knew for certain that Holger was wrong as my son had seen the tent himself. In the “himmel” there were fields and Holger had a tractor and a wagon for liquid manure. When Holger had to visit the earth he used a ladder - or an elevator when he had to bring his tractor and wagon along. One of Holger’s main functions in the “himmel” was to throw the pink evening skies out of his newspapers. It later turned out that there was a correspondence between this mythological Holger and a local farmer by the name of Holger living next to one of my son’s play mates.

¹ The Danish language (as well as the German) uses the same word for both ”heaven” and ”sky”: “himmel”. Ironically, the word “sky” is Danish and was brought to Britain by the Vikings.

The late Klafki and a brief summary

There are several new elements in the thinking of the late Klafki (Klafki 1991). There are four important new elements that are relevant in regard to entrepreneurial education. Firstly, Klafki makes it clear that general education basically has got to do with self-determination, co-determination and solidarity. Secondly, he argues that teaching has to be problem based and must address “core problems of the modern world”: peace, environmental issues, socially created inequalities, effects of new technologies/intercultural education, I-You-relationships. As a result, a larger part of school teaching has to be multidisciplinary – that is the third element. Fourthly, learning processes have to be directed towards (aim-oriented) themes and social competences.

All of these elements hold implications for entrepreneurial education. Self-determination and co-determination have got to do with the autonomy and self-directedness of the students and their ability to assess themselves. Problem-based teaching and learning is intimately intertwined with the focus on working with authentic problems of whatever kind they may be. These problems (or themes) are cross-curricular by nature and therefore have to be approached using methods and tools provided by the whole range of school subjects.

To sum it up: The school has to open the child to the world and give the child the necessary tools to take part and share responsibility in the world in order to develop new values and competences.

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