Teaching Grounded Theory. Analysis of an Epistemic Practice

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Abstract
In this paper, we look at our own teaching practice in seminars on Grounded Theory against the background of a pragmatist–interactionist perspective. We analyze situations that we have documented in the form of reflective notes focusing on central action problems of teachers and students, on their different positions for negotiation, and on strategies to “solve” and legitimize them. These problems arise in the course of teaching methodological classifications, the appropriateness of the methods, the logic of the research process, the analysis process, and analytical attitudes in the teaching process and must be worked on jointly by teachers and students. Using procedures of the Grounded Theory methodology, we conceptualize the action problems and reconstruct teaching Grounded Theory as a situational treatment of irritations as well as a negotiation and legitimation of (intersubjectively shared) meaning. Against this background, we show that teaching can be understood as a joint epistemic practice of teachers and students.

Keywords
Teaching qualitative research, grounded theory, researching own practice, pragmatist–interactionist perspective, epistemic practice, reflective notes

Introduction
By applying an ethnographically guided reflection of our own teaching practice and against the background of an action-theoretical perspective (Strauss, 1978, 1993), this contribution analyzes situations that occur in seminars on Grounded Theory. It focuses on central action problems of teachers and students, on their different positions for negotiation, and on strategies to “solve” and legitimize them. In terms of action theory, teaching can be understood as a complex and situational process in which teachers and students are involved in a co-constructive way and are each confronted with specific problems. For example, the students experience their own methodological positioning, working with theoretical sampling or the distinction between categories and memos in data analysis as challenges. The challenge for teachers is to recognize these problems as such, to understand them, and to develop answers to them. Against this background, a special dynamic of situational co-construction of teaching emerges, which is not necessarily ascribed to it in advance and which is associated with irritation for both sides: What makes sense for teachers does not necessarily make sense for students. Rather, teaching situations must be defined and negotiated together.

The first aim of this paper is to reconstruct the teaching of Grounded Theory as a situational treatment of irritations as well as an ordering and legitimation of (intersubjectively shared) meaning. Secondly, the contribution clarifies that teaching can be understood as an epistemic practice where central principles of the epistemological logic of Grounded Theory are reproduced and updated. We establish a reciprocal connection between research practice and teaching practice with Grounded Theory, the epistemological implications of which we will elaborate on in the last section.

With its pragmatist–interactionist perspective³ and the focus on situational events, this contribution fills a void in the reflection on and empirical analysis of teaching practice with Grounded Theory. Thematically relevant texts mainly address

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seminar conception and didactic implementation (Charmaz, 2015; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Huehls, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2008; Holton, 2019; Mühlmeyer-Mentzel & Schürmann, 2011). However, the situational treatment of irritations while teaching Grounded Theory remains a desideratum in these texts, which is therefore innovatively addressed and elaborated in our paper. Another innovative aspect of our contribution consists of linking our own analysis to the specific epistemic logic of Grounded Theory. Thus, we implement the action-theoretical and the methodological postulates of Anselm L. Strauss in two ways: on the level of phenomena or everyday actions and on a meta-level of (self-)observation of scientific practice. We focus on practices of joint problem-solving that we have reconstructed as typical for the teaching of Grounded Theory, and we analyze how a discussion of methodological premises and procedures takes place. In doing so, we follow up on Anselm L. Strauss (2010) who illustrates methodological premises and procedures of Grounded Theory by recording, transcribing, and commenting on interpretation sessions. In this context, Strauss also indicates problems that arise in teaching. However, these references are not systematized as challenges of Grounded Theory teaching, because the explicit focus lies on teaching methodological competence. Here, our contribution goes further in two respects: It focuses on challenges in teaching practice and refers to the entire process of Grounded Theory research.

Theoretical Framing: Teaching Grounded Theory as Processual Ordering

Before presenting and analyzing concrete examples from teaching practice with Grounded Theory, we outline our theoretical perspective on teaching. We assume a pragmatist–interactionist perspective (Strauss, 1978, 1993) and understand teaching as a processual ordering that occurs between students and teachers. This theoretical framing seems appropriate for our research object in two respects. First, our teaching practice showed us that irritations between students and teachers are going to arise repeatedly. In order to successfully resolve them, it is necessary to deal with them while teaching. A pragmatist–interactionist perspective enables a theoretically grounded approach to both irritations and processual ordering. Second, it is consistent with the basic assumptions of Grounded Theory, this paper’s subject.

Strauss (1978, 234) describes processual ordering as “one of the possible means of ‘getting things accomplished’ when parties need to deal with each other to get those things accomplished.” Accordingly, both teachers and students operate as active participants in courses. Students and teachers work on several action problems to find common solutions and to ensure the “success” of the teaching. Despite the structural hierarchy between teachers and students, there is still room for ordering when dealing with these problems.

As part of the processual ordering, situations need to be defined on an ongoing basis: Situations are interpreted, relevance is set, the actors develop alternatives for action, and ultimately come to a (joint) decision on action. Following the pragmatist–interactionist postulate according to which every concrete action is the solution to a situation (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1965, 84–85), we understand irritation as a situational obstacle to action. It is experienced as a break with habit and demands dedicated attention to the situation as well as a reorientation of the execution of action (Mead, 1969, 235–238). Since actors draw on different knowledge and experience backgrounds, students and teachers interpret situations differently, which often leads to irritation—so our assumption. For instance, students refer to everyday knowledge, and to knowledge acquired during their studies, of science and research, to their knowledge of the practice they are researching or to their professional knowledge of the research object. Teachers primarily refer to their knowledge of Grounded Theory, understood as a set of “ideologies” shared in the scientific community (Strauss et al., 1981, 8) and to their own experiences with Grounded Theory research and teaching. Against this background, students and teachers introduce different positions into the processual ordering. The perception of action problems thus differs, as do the conceivable alternatives for action.

These differing perspectives must be negotiated, as problem solutions are developed. If irritations occur, processual orderings are explicitly led. But they also (implicitly) occur when teaching is reproduced habitually (Strauss, 1993, 43). This does not mean that everything is open and negotiable, because processual orderings are framed by different contexts. On the one hand, interactions are pre-structured by the context of processual ordering. For example, teachers and students are involved in their specific roles and there is an inherent balance of power between the roles. Moreover, current processual orderings are always framed by previous ones. On the other hand, the structural context provides a framework which is constantly (re-)produced in the processual orderings (Strauss, 1978, 98–100). The seminars we present and analyze take place at German universities in Bachelor’s degree programs in Social Work and are structured by module plans.

Following this theoretical perspective, we understand Grounded Theory teaching as “processual ordering” (Strauss, 1993, 254, emphasis in original). Therefore, problems of action arise within the framework of structurally embedded and hierarchically organized teaching settings on which students and teachers take different positions, the meaning of which they negotiate and in relation to which they (must) develop (joint) strategies for problem-solving. This perspective makes it possible to gain internal insights into teaching situations below the surface of the didactic structuring of seminars and to analytically capture patterns of problem-solving and legitimation in teaching practice.
Teaching Grounded Theory: Experiences, Reflections, and Analyses

In the following, we present action problems that manifested in seminars on Grounded Theory and that we as teachers had to solve together with the students. The seminars were held in the Bachelor’s degree course Social Work at a German university of applied sciences and continued over two semesters (fifth and sixth semester). In the seminars, students carried out small research projects on their own or work on a research question as a seminar group (20–25 students). The seminar’s goal is to go through all the steps of a research process via exemplary practical research. Therefore, we accompany and support the students while they develop questions and research designs, access the field, collect data, and analyze and present the results. As we conducted one seminar each, we were challenged to continuously reflect on our teaching practice. This led us to consider going one step further and generate empirical data that would allow us to conduct cross-seminar analyses. Using the form of reflective notes, we generated data by documenting situational events that both teachers and the students experienced as irritating. As teachers, we did this in bullet points (in the sense of jottings, Emerson et al., 2007, 19–21) to reflect on teaching practice: We wrote down events and themes in order to document clues for teaching development, both for the current course and for following courses in the future. As researchers, we picked out typical events from these bullet-point notes, condensed them into multiple texts, and thus prepared them as research material—the results of which then again could give us clues for further development of teaching. Condensing and textualizing these notes (similarly to classic ethnographic fieldnotes) as already constitutes the first stage of interpreting the bullet-point notes (Breidenstein et al., 2015, 86–88). These condensed notes thus form the data on which our analysis is based. Since we conducted the seminars ourselves, we are researchers existentially committed in the investigated practice in the sense of Anne Honer (2009, 198–200). In the notes, the perspectives of us as seminar leaders on the courses of action are documented as well as the reflections on these courses of action. The notes can therefore be regarded as ethnographic fieldnotes in which women researchers play a central role as actors in the collected data (Streck et al., 2013, 25–27).

Based on these empirical data, which we collected over the period of a year, we asked questions regarding the processual ordering of problems between students and teachers and about strategies for developing and legitimizing solutions in the seminar. The analysis was conducted according to Grounded Theory (Strauss in an interview with Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Legewie & Schervier-Legewie, 2004, 59; Strauss, 2010): We coded and contrasted the reflective notes, made a selection for the detailed analysis, worked out content-related connections, and abstracted them conceptually. As a result, we have identified six main categories which we regard as typical action problems in teaching practice with Grounded Theory: (non-)knowledge of methodological classifications (3.1), the interview as the most efficient method? (3.2), uncertainty in planning (3.3), sense and nonsense of memos (3.4), reflection of practice or analysis of data? (3.5), and normativity and existential commitment (3.6). The category designations consist of two parts. The first part formulates the action problem, which causes irritation and must be dealt with. In the second part, this problem of action is methodologically reformulated in the sense of Grounded Theory. In the following, we present these categories and clarify their typology, using selected situations as examples.

(Non-)Knowledge of Methodological Classifications—On the Epistemic Logic of Grounded Theory

“At the beginning of the course, I ask the students whether they have experience with qualitative social research and whether they are familiar with Grounded Theory. They answer that in the second semester the lecture ‘Methods of Empirical Social Research’ was offered, in the course of which they got to know the survey methods questionnaire, interview and observation and were able to try them in smaller group projects. The students do not know Grounded Theory. As an introduction, I present the main premises of qualitative social research and focus on the methodology of Grounded Theory. Soon afterwards, the students form small groups and begin conceptual work on the research projects. As I go through and listen to the discussions, I am surprised: some of them choose the questionnaire as a survey method. I ask why they want to do research in a Grounded Theory seminar with a standardizing questionnaire. The students don’t understand why I ask this and what the problem is, they are surprised. They tell me they ‘learned that in the lecture.’ I realize that students may not know the difference between reconstructive and standardized social research, each with a different epistemologic logic. I ask them to tell me more about the contents of the lecture. The students say the material was taught too quickly, only the surface of the topics was scratched, they would have liked more in-depth knowledge. Thereupon I decide to change the plan of my lessons, to repeat topics and to emphasize them.”

(Reflective note, Author 1)

This note describes the processual ordering of expectations regarding the methodological classification of research projects. From the teacher’s point of view, students do not possess the knowledge of scientific paradigms and their respective different epistemological logics (Hesse-Biber, 2008, 312)—a knowledge which the teacher assumes to be present after the attendance of a lecture on empirical social research and the introduction offered by herself. When the students choose the questionnaire as a survey instrument for their research projects in the style of Grounded Theory, the teacher is confronted with a lack of knowledge she had not expected.
The students attend an empirical (Grounded Theory) seminar and therefore apply the knowledge they gained in a thematically relevant lecture on empirical social research. When drafting the research designs, they legitimately choose one of three survey methods they were taught there. In order to deal with the irritation caused by the choice of the questionnaire and the questioning of this choice, the students again justify their actions with the lecture, but discursively reverse the indicator. It is no longer regarded as legitimation for the acquired knowledge, but for the knowledge that has not been acquired. Students do this in a mode of critique by describing the structure and course of the lecture in more detail, and by labeling the teaching of the material as too concise and fragmentary. The students transform their initial idea that they acted “correctly” or appropriately by referring to the lecture and the knowledge they brought along into the idea of their own actions as “incorrect” or inappropriate due to the lecture and the knowledge they did not bring along. In this way, they perform a situational dissolution of the irritation.

The teacher handles the irritation by first modifying the seminar’s planned approach. Content is repositioned and emphasized by means of repetition. The material on the context in which Grounded Theory originated, on the Chicago School and the distinction between the interpretative and normative paradigms (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 1–3) gains a new function: It does not only represent relevant knowledge from the canon of Grounded Theory teaching from the teacher’s point of view. The irritation leads to a strategic use of this material and serves as legitimation to dissuade students from using a standardized questionnaire and to achieve the choice of other survey methods in the sense of an adequate methodological classification. The teacher argues with the epistemic logic of Grounded Theory and explains three points: Firstly, the understanding of reality as constantly changing and as produced in the actions of the actors; secondly, the processual and perspectival understanding of theory formation; and thirdly, the understanding of research as empirically oriented, subject-bound, and constituting the research object (Strübing, 2008, 281–282). The teacher advises against standardizing the methodological procedure because this contradicts the epistemic logic of Grounded Theory and its conception of research as a creative and iterative-cyclical process (ibid.: 290). This strategy of action aims at methodologically classifying the seminar for the students and at imparting to them the knowledge that there is a methodology behind every method, a specific understanding of research, theory formation, and social reality which researches have to reflect on and transfer in research practice.

The Interview as the Most Efficient Method?—Generating Data According to Grounded Theory

“In a seminar session, students are assigned with the tasks of finding a research topic in small-group work, narrowing down the research question and designing an appropriate methodological approach. As I go to the individual groups and listen to their discussions, I notice how quickly the students go about formulating a guideline for interviews. All groups intend to conduct guided interviews, although, from my point of view, the research interest has only just been roughly outlined. I am amazed. While teaching, I had emphasized the relevance of research methods to the research object and had also mentioned, e.g., ethnography, document and image analysis as possible methodical approaches. In the plenum I ask the students about the reasons why everyone wants to work with interviews. In response, I mainly hear they already have experience with interviews. A second argument is that they want to research experts and a third one that they believe this will make it easier for them to enter the field, as their field of research is also their field of profession (social work), in which they are already engaged and have access to potential interviewees. I tell the students that their argumentation does not convince me. In fact, it irritates me. The students react to this with the same irritation. In return, I talk to them about understanding empirical data in Grounded Theory.” (Reflective note, Author 1)

In this situation, the question of generating adequate data in Grounded Theory research is negotiated. From a student perspective, the decision to use the interview method seems legitimate because they have already conducted interviews during their studies. Their own experience and the prospect of “safe” access to the field appear to be solid criteria enough to guide the students’ choice of a survey method. This decision is made in the context of a course of studies organized in modules, which offers students few options for development and which is primarily performed as the efficient fulfillment of tasks.

From the teacher’s perspective, students do not display an investigative attitude in the conception of data collection. Rather, the teacher is under the impression that the students want to complete the tasks quickly and efficiently. It is not the subject that determines the method, but the method determines the subject. This impression is created by the collective preference for the interview, but even more by the legitimation of this preference. The teacher experiences this legitimation as a problem because it bypasses the methodical-methodological understanding of empirical data in Grounded Theory.

To overcome the irritation that has arisen, the teacher firstly argues with the principle of object adequacy (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 27, 151). Methods are not chosen because they have already been tested or promise an easier entry into the field, but because they are best suited to answer the research question. This substantive rationale should guide the data generating process as opposed to merely the prior knowledge of methods or research pragmatics. Secondly, the teacher explains the premise of the Grounded Theory of materials as data rich in theory. The data collection is already a step toward the reconstruction of everyday practice and supports the continuous development of an empirically based theory (Strauss, 2010, 2–3). Thirdly, the teacher points out the
risks involved in a habitual recourse to the interview method. Students could miss out on relevant information in the field. In the course of this argumentation, the teacher introduces the concept of contextual knowledge. In a reflective manner, the professional proximity to the field, as promising as it appears, must be questioned and integrated into the research process as contextual knowledge. Finally, the teacher advises students to adopt an experimental research attitude (Honer, 2009, 203)—both in the delimitation of the research question and in the generation of data—and recalls the diversity of methodological approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 27–29) anchored in Grounded Theory.

Uncertainty in Planning—The Challenges of Theoretical Sampling

“In one session, we prepare the first day of observation in the field. I tell the students that they should go into the field openly and perceive as much as possible of what is happening there. A student requests to design an observation sheet according to which the observations can be made. I am irritated and argue against it: This would be informed exclusively by her previous knowledge. Phenomena she does not expect in the field would not come into her observational focus. Instead, students should approach the field as openly as possible, go into the field and see what is relevant there: What do the professionals do? I explain that after the field trip, they will write ethnographic fieldnotes (there is a separate seminar unit for this) which they will analyze. Based on their analysis, they can develop questions for another field trip—which is already more focused. In the course of the seminar, the student asks three or four more times for a guideline or more orientation for the observation. I am irritated that my answer is not sufficient, but I encourage her to engage in the open approach and trust that she will see things in the field that are relevant to the research question. I explain that all researchers feel the same way, including myself, especially during the first research experiences. We wish for more structure, but this would only be informed by our previous knowledge and not by the phenomenon we want to investigate. The student still leaves the session unsatisfied, but later she tells me that during the process she understood my point.” (Reflective Note, Author 2)

Here, students and the teacher negotiate the structure of the research process. The different topics negotiated in the interaction described above are determined by theoretical sampling (Strauss, 2010, 38–39): Firstly, it requires researchers to openly approach the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, it presupposes a specific relationship between prior knowledge and non-knowledge (as yet) of empirical facts, namely through the concept of theoretical sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 32–34; Strübing, 2014, 57–59). Finally, it is connected with the iterative and cyclical structure of the research process which requires fundamental planning, but where surprises and modifications must be expected (Strauss, 2010, 11–13; Strübing, 2014, 51–53).

For the students, such a procedure is new, not only because of their previous experience with planning and task fulfillment within the framework of a modularized course of studies. They also have a different understanding of scientific work so far. Their understanding of scientific work is—so it seems—very strongly influenced by everyday positivism (see also Hesse-Biber, 2008, 31–33, 312; Holton, 2019, 419). They want to plan their approach with a set goal in mind: Based on their expertise, they develop questions for the field, then follow up on them in the field and answer the questions afterward. This is made clear by the question for an observation guide. As it was repeated multiple times, it shows the irritation caused by contradictory principles. The inherent understanding of the planning of scientific epistemic processes is so deeply rooted that the structuring offered by the teacher does not suffice to ensure that the students are “prepared” to go into the field. This in turn irritates the teacher in the situation.

Here, the position of the students “collides” with the position of the teacher. She argues that the data will only be substantial when the students’ influence on generating said data through prior knowledge is reduced significantly so that, in the sense of theoretical sampling, the data are shaped by the relevance in the field instead. This is the only way to recognize what is new in the field and what has not been recognized yet. She advocates the interplay of induction, deduction, and abduction, which is fundamental to Grounded Theory (Strübing, 2014, 55–57). She has experienced for herself that the specific, iterative-cyclical form of the research process requires her to endure uncertainties in planning—and expresses this in response to the student’s uncertainty.

In doing so, the teacher represents and legitimates Grounded Theory research in the processual ordering with the student. The goal is discovering something new, which is facilitated by theoretical sampling. In order to convey this, she makes use of different strategies of action: she acts on the level of argumentation by repeating and differentiating her positions. But she also reacts to the expressed uncertainty by talking about her own experiences with uncertainty. Apparent action strategies are the encouragement of the student to engage in an open process and the normalization of uncertainty in Grounded Theory research processes. These strategies at least lead to the student getting involved in the process. This makes it possible for her to experience its structuring through theoretical sampling, and she can finally interpret it as meaningful.

Sense and Nonsense of Memos—Oscillating Between Analytical Work and the Reflection Thereon

“During a seminar session the students interpret their data in small groups. One of the working groups asks me for support. I sit down and the students show me their notes. They want to make sure they have correctly distinguished between ‘categories’ and ‘memos’. The students also ask whether they
really need this distinction and why the categorization by itself is not ‘sufficient’ since it is so complex. I understand that students struggle with the distinction between two methodological concepts. What irritates me, though, is that this prompts them to question the concepts’ methodological meaning and to look for shortcut strategies, both in order to reduce the temporal but also the analytical expenditure. I explain to the student group the difference between memos and categories in Grounded Theory and ask how memos are handled in the course of research. I learn that memos were only written in the course of category formation. I say that students may have been working with memos for some time but have not identified them as such. Therefore, I ask questions that should encourage the working group to reflect on its methodological approach and to explain it in detail.” (Reflective Note, Author 1)

In the situation described above, the meaning of the distinction between two methodological concepts in Grounded Theory—categories and theoretical memos—is negotiated. In essence, it is concerned with the circularity of research in the style of Grounded Theory and with the oscillation between the process of analysis and its reflection. In this situation, circularity is addressed by the relation between memos and categories. It occurs as a problem in the process of data interpretation.

The students experience the analysis process as time-consuming and strenuous, as adherence to predetermined and complex analytical steps, the meaning of which is not clear to them. The students first solve the substantive question of the relation between categories and memos by seeking the advice of the teacher. While talking to her, they also consider to forego writing memos. This solution strategy is justified by the desire to reduce the “effort” of data interpretation and is neither object-related nor methodologically legitimized (Corbin in an interview with Cisneros-Puebla, 2004, 17; Strauss, 2010, 60–61).

From the perspective of the teacher, this situation reveals several intertwined action problems that are verbalized by questioning the difference between memos and categories. Firstly, students move quickly and purposefully toward the production of results. Secondly, they seem to understand the research process as a mere linear sequence of individual methodological steps rather than as a meaningful and cyclical continuity. Thirdly, these steps are efficiently managed by the students by skipping them (if possible) instead of developing them. Here, the teacher misses the understanding that the process of generating results is itself a result of methodical-methodological reflections, which defies linearity and is modulated by the researchers in a way that is suitable for the subject and creative, and which can be controlled methodically, for example, by writing memos.

This set of issues confounds methodical, methodological, and institutional–organizational questions, which are all addressed by the teacher. She explains the importance of categories and memos as heuristics that support continuous theory formation, and how each fulfill different methodical functions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 169–170). This intends to clarify that methodical concepts should be handled as tools that help grasp the complexity of the research subject. It is not a matter of using these tools mechanically because they are part of the course, but of reflecting on them in relation to the question and applying them adequately. For this purpose, the teacher encourages students to take their time and to modify readings as long as possible to make room for new things (Strauss, 1988, 97) instead of quickly establishing categories. She also selects examples for different types of memos characteristic of particular phases of research (Strauss, 2010, 111–113). This is to show that writing memos accompanies the research process from the very beginning, as it records the thoughts, ideas, questions, and decisions of the researchers. The teacher brings forward the argument that research needs to be transparent and traceable, which can be guaranteed by systematic and careful documentation in memos. Since student researchers are organized in teams, written memos record the perspectives of all the participating students. In addition to emphasizing documentation as a quality criterion, the teacher introduces another argument: The practice of writing memos is part of the research process, and at the same time, it enables the researchers to keep an analytical distance from their own project. The purpose of memos is to refocus the researchers’ attention from the research practice to the reflection on this practice—it is a circular movement of empirical data, the object of research and theoretical abstraction (Strübing, 2008, 304).

Reflection of Practice or Analysis of Data?—
References to Previous Knowledge in Category Formation

“While we analyze data generated by the students themselves (fieldnotes), I am under the impression that they are used to combining practical observations with theoretical concepts. They refer to terms from the professional discourse and to terms of their own practical experience. When naming categories, though, they start using very abstract terms. For example, the students analyze a data example in which a professional reprimands a young person and assign the code ‘power’ or ‘role’ as a name to it. I remark that the terms they assign do not make any meaningful statements about the field, as power or roles are always relevant. While power and roles are not irrelevant, the actual question at hand is how they are represented in the field. The category’s name has to be a reflection to that. I often exemplify this with a thesis in which a student in Colombia researched the system of assistance for internally displaced persons with GT. Her key category was ‘help’. The supervising teacher then asked her what was specific about the help she had observed. The student answered that the help was a battle. The key category of the student was finally called ‘Help as a battle’. The students understand this example, but often they are not able to realize
their discoveries in research practice. Therefore, I analyze their own data together with the students so they understand how to get more insightful access to it. Some students are able to access it relatively quick and work together in the sense of a research workshop. Others watch me analyze and try to understand what it is all about. After I analyzed a paragraph by way of example, a student once said: Now I finally understand why you do this, why you have to write fieldnotes and why you have to analyze them so meticulously.” (Reflective note, Author 2)

Here, the object of processual ordering is the meaning of theoretical sensitivity in the context of category formation, and how it can be implemented in research practice.

The students introduce their negotiating position in the course of category formation. In doing so, they make decisions that are shaped by their experience in establishing links between practical experience and theoretical concepts. So far, they have primarily reflected on (their own) practical experience through theoretical concepts such as power and roles.: The terms are used to identify different phenomena that are relevant in the context of practical experience and to develop new perspectives on the students’ own practice. However, the aim is not to develop new terms for specific phenomena in the field of practice. In this way, they now relate theoretical concepts to social practice described in the data.

The teacher, however, aims at a certain level of abstraction, which is central to many steps of analysis in Grounded Theory research. The terms to be formed should not be highly abstract, for this would decontextualize them from the field under investigation. However, they should not be too close to the data either because they should abstract from individual actions and refer to phenomena in the field. On this level, there arises the potential to discover and conceptualize something new. Therefore, students must fall back on their (subject-related) previous knowledge (Strübing, 2010, 57–59), but in a different way than they have done so far. The teacher thus represents the requirement that categories in Grounded Theory research should be meaningful in terms of content about phenomena in the field (ibid.). Although theoretical knowledge helps the sensitization, it is by relating this knowledge to the data something new is developed (Strübing, 2014, 46).

The central strategy of the teacher is to instruct the students, and particularly to show them how things are done and to do them together with the teacher6. This makes it possible to experience what can hardly be explained: the differences between various ways in which connections between theory and data or action practice are established. Only when the differences are brought together and experienced, it becomes clear that a specific level of abstraction is required in order to generate insights about the phenomenon under investigation. Students understand which kind of knowledge acquisition is possible through analysis compared to the knowledge gained through ethnographic fieldnotes, and that observations must be recorded in order to make empirically observable data accessible for analysis.

**Normativity and Existential Commitment—Distancing from the Data in the Analysis Process**

“The observations described (cf. Section 3.5) illustrate that some students succeed in developing an analytical approach to the data. However, in the joint analysis with the students, I also notice that some of the students approach the data not analytically, but from a normative perspective. The students either make statements about the actions of the social workers documented in the data, such as: ‘this totally unprofessional’ which they justify by referring to normative professional discourses, or they legitimize the actions described. They argue either within situational or structural constraints or with potentially underlying normative ideas of ‘good’ social work.

This self-evident manner of normative evaluation irritates me. In response, I point out that the student’s task as researchers is not to evaluate the action, but to use the data to explore in which ways said action is executed. I stress how our first assumption is always that there are (good) reasons why people act the way they act in a certain field, and that these reasons are reflected in the data. In the context of our research, ‘professional’ is not a normative but an analytical category: professional action is not good action, but action by professionals who, by status, take on certain roles, have power, refer to professional knowledge, etc. This distinction seems to be completely new to students.” (Reflective note, Author 2)

This note discusses the perspective from which researchers should approach their data. It is a matter of distancing from the data, which is performed in different ways. What forms of distancing are necessary and appropriate?

The students distance themselves using different approaches: some resort to analytical abstraction, and others settle for a normative approach, either by criticizing the actions of the field participants or by legitimizing them. These different interactions with the data are attempts to classify and understand it. The fact that students position themselves normatively illustrates that they themselves are involved in the—highly normative—field of social work they are researching. If they turn to the data in a normative-critical manner, they position themselves as experts in the field. If they turn to it in a normative-legitimizing way, they position themselves as learners: They see the professionals they observe as the experts they strive to become themselves, and who therefore must know what is “right” to do in practice. The experts are potential instructors for internships and future colleagues toward whom they may feel a sense of loyalty.

How the students deal with the data, represents different practices to abstract: If they conceptualize it in terms of Grounded Theory, they abstract it analytically. If they address the data normatively, they classify the observed actions in relation to normative professional discourses: they criticize or
legitimize. This also leads to an abstraction from individual actions—but on a normative level. This means that they failed at building a distance toward the data in the sense of Grounded Theory, because the specialist discourses are part of the field.

The normative approach to the data irritates the teacher. She is concerned with a specific type of abstraction in the sense of the analysis techniques of Grounded Theory: analytical, non-evaluative distancing, the dissolving data, and their conceptualization (Strauss, 2010, 28–30). Her central focus is understanding how the field works. Using the term “professional,” she points out the difference between analytical and normative forms of abstraction. The question “Is something good happening here?” as used in the students’ approach, should be replaced with “What is happening here?”

The teacher thus demands, albeit rather implicitly, that students distance themselves from the field in which they are existentially engaged (Honer, 2009, 198–200).

In order to enable an analytical distance from the data, the teacher therefore falls back on various strategies. She introduces the distinction between an analytical and a normative attitude regarding the data. This distinction is new for students who routinely turn to social work practice in a normative way. Therefore, the teacher offers a reflection for the student’s analytical work. Furthermore, she tries to arouse curiosity among the students: They should not think they already know everything about the field just because they are existentially committed to it.

Conclusion

The Processual Ordering of Goals—Grounded Theory Teaching as Shared Epistemic Practice

In summary, the paper focuses on action problems we have experienced, recorded, and analytically abstracted in our Grounded Theory teaching. These problems lead to irritations, which are negotiated by students and teachers alike in the situation and dealt with using their own strategies for action and legitimation. The central overarching action problems, which are effective in all categories in various ways, are a positivist understanding of science and social reality, different ways of dealing with previous knowledge, contradictory logics of plannable task fulfillment within the framework of modularized study organization and unplannable, creative and cyclical research processes, as well as unreflecting existential commitment in the researched fields. With regard to the question of teaching as a joint action (negotiation) practice against the background of the power structure it is carried out within, the action problems described can be abstracted in so far as they deal with negotiating the goals of Grounded Theory teaching. This implies that the idea of what Grounded Theory teaching aims at is interpreted differently by students and teachers. For the students, the goal is to complete the task, that is, the production of results through data collection, preparation of the data, analysis and its textualization, or whatever assignment has to be finished in order to get a documented performance record after the seminar is over. For the teachers, however, Grounded Theory teaching aims at a hermeneutic development of the research process, and at discoveries about the subject under investigation that are elaborated therein, or in other words, at the exploratory, creative, and methodically controlled approach to the realities being researched. While “providing performance records” and “generating research results” are not mutually exclusive, they do create a tension that produces situational irritation and frames the interaction between teachers and students. From a pragmatist–interactionist perspective, dealing with these irritations represents the solution of problems of action. As irritations usually entail deviations from habit, they set in motion processes of negotiation and reflection and produce new knowledge that can be deployed in teaching. This paper also resulted from creativity caused by irritations.

So what can we conclude about Grounded Theory teaching as an epistemic practice? What kind of new knowledge does it actually produce? On the basis of the pragmatist view of action as problem-solving, any teaching can be examined as epistemic practice: Knowledge is created by solving problems and is both a prerequisite and a product of actions. Teaching is thus to be understood as the simultaneous communication and generation of knowledge: knowledge about research subjects, research practice, and teaching practice. If, according to Hitzler (1999, 291), one summarizes the definition of the situation as “the ‘switch point’ between knowledge and action,” then Grounded Theory teaching turns out to be an epistemic practice in two respects: first, in the mode of a first-degree construction (Schütz, 2004, 158), when we as teachers shape seminar practice in our everyday actions and negotiate irritations according to the situation and second, in the mode of a second-degree construction (ibid.: 159–160), when we as researchers analyze our seminar practice empirically and in “slow motion,” relieved of the burden of action, thus questioning the teaching in a self-reflexive way. Since we are twofold existentially committed—in teaching as researchers, in researching as teachers—both modes form a continuum. On this continuum, the epistemic practice under study oscillates between the generation of action knowledge and the generation of explanatory knowledge (Honer, 2009, 200). Accordingly, we also make use of the epistemic logic of Grounded Theory in two respects. As teachers, we deal with the situational irritations by methodologically arguing with premises of the Grounded Theory. As researchers, we analyze our experiences by making use of the methodological tools of Grounded Theory in research practice. The knowledge thus generated is reintegrated into our teaching practice. At its core, the common epistemic practice if performed through the circulation of knowledge, which is continuously developed through situational problem-solving, the reflection thereupon and analysis thereof, and thus becomes useful for the further development of teaching practice.
Reflecting on one’s own teaching practice by way of research requires the “acquisition of a practical membership in the events,” as Honer (2009, 201) writes. However, the distinction between our roles as teachers and researchers can only be of analytical nature, because we recognize social reality, that is, define situations, perceive, and deal with action problems, does not differ according to whether we take on the role of teachers or researchers. As researchers, we certainly work more explicitly and with more methodical control. We can use the insights we gain from this to identify scopes to negotiate goals that are incorporated in the power structure of university teaching—and to shape these scopes in such a way that joint epistemic practice can take place, making teaching exciting and enriching.

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Notes
1. In Halatcheva-Trapp & Unterkofler (2020), we published two aspects of our study, focusing on only two elaborated result categories and only on the negotiation of situational events in teaching.
2. Translated by Simone Lackerbauer. The translation of this article has been financially supported by the DGSA—German Association of Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit). The authors appreciate this support. In addition, the authors are very grateful to Jasmin Wittkowski for the careful editing of the manuscript.
3. In our usage, “pragmatist” refers to the theoretical perspective and “pragmatic” to the practice of action. In this way, we orient ourselves toward Strübing (2007).
4. Furthermore, the teaching of qualitative methods is also discussed without specific references to a methodology (Bögelein & Serrano-Velarde, 2012; Breuer & Schreier, 2007; Flick & Bauer, 2010; Schmitt, 2007).
5. This is a selection of central action problems and by no means exhaustive. Rather, in the course of teaching, there arise action problems that also typically occur in the teaching of qualitative research, such as “going into the field openly,” “transcription as an interpretation process,” and “abstraction in the course of detailed analysis.” For this paper, we have focused on action problems which, in our experience, occur in a specific way in Grounded Theory teaching or are solved in a specific way with regard to Grounded Theory knowledge.
6. Cf. The concept of the analysis seminars by Strauss (1988) and the documented analysis sessions in Strauss (2010); but also Flick and Bauer (2010, 601) and Hesse-Biber (2008, 315–317).
7. Strauss himself often worked with students who had jobs as social workers, nurses, or similar occupations in the fields in which they were doing research. In an interview on his data analysis course in the style of Grounded Theory, he says that these students have to deal with it in “field methods courses” (conducted previous to his course). Strauss refers to questions of field access and the establishment of field roles as well as ethical questions. However, he does not address the implications of existential commitments for analytical work (Strauss, 1988, 95).

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