Cold Heart, Warm Heart: On fiction, interaction, and emotion in medical education

Anja Rydén Gramner (IBL)

Fictional works are understood to have unique qualities that emotionally engage the reader, unlike other types of texts. Scholars within medical humanities argue for the close relationship between fiction and medicine, and the similarities between a reader interpreting a fictional text and a physician interpreting the stories of a patient, to understand the hidden and implicit meaning between and behind words (Charon, 2001). Medical schools around the world make use of fiction as a didactic tool to teach students self-awareness, reflection, identification and empathy, with the argument that these skills will help student in their professional development. Emotional awareness of both the individual’s own emotional reactions and the emotional reactions of patients and relatives are central to becoming a professional physician, it is argued, and in light of research suggesting empathy decline in medical education, the possible development of emotional skills embedded in fiction use have been highlighted in medical education. But the classroom practices of fiction use have hitherto not been studied in-situ.

In my thesis, the relationship between fiction, interaction and emotion is empirically investigated as it is made present in medical education fiction seminars, thus focusing on the “black box” of the fiction seminar classroom (Rydén Gramner, 2022). Discursive psychology (DP) forms the theoretical and methodological framework to analyse 58 hours of video- and audio-recorded fiction seminars from two Swedish medical schools. Emotion from a DP perspective is understood not as a reflection of an inner experience, but as an interactionally achieved phenomenon, deployed in the formation of social action (Edwards, 1999). In my talk, I take my starting point in one of the articles in my thesis (currently in print) to discuss the results of my thesis and the questions still remaining about the relationship between fiction, interaction and emotion as a professional skill in medical education.