

## “I mean, everybody is kinda racist.” PowerPoint presentations in social-studies classrooms in Germany

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- Learn and explore how students hold presentations in social-studies classrooms and how they foster “racial literacy”.
- The article shows that presentations have didactic functions: Students learn to transform knowledge in a socio-constructivist way.
- A case study catches the deconstruction of racism in everyday school life.
- Presentations are an indicator of a change in the culture of teaching.

**Purpose:** PowerPoint presentations have changed representations of knowledge. They represent a social transformation process of communication which is also reflected in social-studies classrooms. Thus, it is important to examine not only how students hold presentations but also to explore the construction of knowledge through presentations: What are the *didactic* functions?

**Methodology:** The article focuses on a case study that was part of a doctoral dissertation that uses audio recordings, interviews and classroom observations in order to explore presentations in social-studies classrooms.

**Findings:** A presentation – the shooting of Michael Brown – by 10<sup>th</sup>-grade student Laura shows: *Students select and transform knowledge in a socio-constructivist and didactic way.* Presentations are the starting point of a process of negotiation of knowledge, which is triggered by the presenting students. Laura asks within the lesson: What is racism and what can we learn about racial structures? By reading the article teachers can learn about teaching students about race and racism through presentations.

**Keywords:** presentations, social-science education, transformation of knowledge, performance, racism, racial literacy, Michael Brown, anti-racist Bildung



## 1 Introduction: presentations as a cultural phenomenon

"PowerPoint is a social phenomenon, and as society is constructed by meaningful social actions, it is also a cultural phenomenon." (Knoblauch 2013, p. 3) Presentations are well established in society (cf. Heafner 2004; Knoblauch 2007; Mason et al. 2000; Peters 2011) and children are introduced to presentations early in school – they are an integral and ritualized part of school teaching (cf. Hertz et al. 2015; Kernbach et al. 2015): "Now, PowerPoint is everywhere and is expected everywhere." (Knight 2015, p. 271) Students learn how to prepare a presentation, how to deal with a topic and how to introduce it to fellow students. A presentation is always followed by a discussion and a feedback: Students learn how the act of speaking becomes a presentation and they are taught to present knowledge to others in public, i.e. in the classroom. In school, teachers introduce students systematically to this complex task.

The social significance of presentations is not new, lectures were held before the appearance of digital slides. Nevertheless, theoretical approaches to society, especially in the context of the use of digital media, speak of a cultural change (cf. Schnettler/Knoblauch 2007): Presentations "as a form of communicative action" (Knoblauch 2013, p. 5) are the very essence of a so-called knowledge society (cf. Schnettler/Knoblauch 2007) or an expression of a performance culture which stresses the relevance of presentations in modern society and the importance of developing different ways of dealing with knowledge. From a sociological point of view it is relevant to analyze the way presentations form knowledge:

"Knowledge is not 'just there' but subject to processes of negotiation, acceptance, canonization, and transmission by more or less institutionalized teaching and learning processes. It is exactly at this juncture that powerpoint plays a prominent role. The powerpoint presentation is, in a nutshell, the communicative form of knowledge. It is by the very form of the communicative actions performed in powerpoint presentations that something can be treated as 'knowledge' is constructed. As knowledge is in principle intangible, it depends on being objectivated by communication [...]. The knowledge society depends even more on processes by which 'knowledge' can be objectivated, fixed and made transferable [...] Powerpoint presentations are the very form for this objectivation and fixation." (Knoblauch 2013, p. 17)

In the following, I use a case study from a social-studies lesson of a district school in Hamburg, Germany to show how students learn to act in a didactic way.<sup>1</sup> I will discuss what these findings mean in the context of school in general and particularly for social-studies classrooms:

- How is knowledge presented and staged by students in presentations and how are presentations held by students?
- Which didactic functions do presentations have in social-studies classrooms?
- How is the topic of the presentation – racism – negotiated in the classroom?

This article shows that presentations in social-studies classrooms have a unique function: The case study of a 10<sup>th</sup> grade class reveals how students learn to select a topic, develop questions, choose pictures or videos and distinguish between the important and the unimportant. Students not only learn how to present in front of a class, they also learn to transform knowledge. In short: They learn to *point* in a didactic way.<sup>2</sup>

Transforming knowledge is originally the central task of teachers. By transferring the act of pointing to students, the central didactic function can be identified: With presentations, students learn that knowledge – in the social-sciences – is constituted through communicative and social actions between themselves and others.



The second chapter defines racism and stresses the importance of negotiating racism in social-studies classrooms. In the third chapter, I will discuss the construction of knowledge from a socio-constructivist point of view and connect that process with the act of pointing. In the fourth chapter, I will present an empirical evaluation approach for the analysis of knowledge processes on the basis of the model of knowledge forms (cf. Grammes 1998). The fifth chapter deals with the reconstruction of a lesson on racism. In the sixth chapter I will conclusively discuss presentations as a ritualized method which is crucial for the development of understanding how knowledge is constituted through social actions.

## 2 Teaching and learning about racism

"To what extent does racism trigger police violence?" asks 10<sup>th</sup> grade student Laura in her presentation. Laura selects the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO – an unarmed black teenager who was shot by a police officer (Ransby 2018, pp. 47 ff.) – to reflect upon and to criticize racism in society and everyday life. She is interested in the topic and after she was assigned the task to hold a presentation, she uses this communicative form to discuss racism. Laura chooses pictures, charts and statistical data in order to convince her teacher and her classmates that there is a connection between racism and police violence – exemplified by the shooting of Michael Brown. She renders the topic in a specific way: by *her* interest, *her* guiding question and *her* contextualization of the event.

"Race is without a doubt a complicated, contentious, and highly charged topic." (Brown/Brown 2011, p. 9) Anti-racist teaching and learning processes (German: Anti-racist Bildung) locate racism not merely as a phenomenon of individual prejudices and attitudes – "racism-as-prejudice view" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1361) – but rather as a "socially constructed category" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1360). Anti-racist Bildung tries to empower students to recognize, understand and criticize racism in its various forms and grasp racism as a multidimensional and "material" (loc. cit.) phenomenon which is embedded in historical and sociopolitical contexts (cf. Elverich/Scherr 2017). Students should be enabled to deconstruct the central belief of racism that "some people are better than others because of their race" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1359) while 'race' can be regarded "as primarily a biological or cultural category easy to read through marks in the body [...] or the cultural practices of groups" (loc. cit.).

Even though it is important for students to reflect personal attitudes and prejudices, central questions should embrace socio-political conditions and structural patterns of racism: "A structural analysis views racism not as a misperception but as a structural arrangement among racial groups." (Sleeter 1993, p. 164) In which way, under which conditions and with what consequences are attitudes and actions – of individuals, groups and institutions – conveyed through racism? What kind of functions have racist structures and how can they be changed?

Students can identify and criticize a "racial structure" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1360), that is defined as a "network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances" (loc. cit.) of different groups and individuals. This structure "places subjects in common social locations" (loc. cit.), in which individuals experience racist structures – as personal mindsets – and reproduce them through social actions. Although races are invented categories, people experience them as "socially real" (loc. cit.; cf. King et al. 2018). This framing gives students the opportunity to grasp racism as an invented biological or cultural category that is not only significant in overt racist mindsets and systems like Nazi Germany; the structural analysis can rather reveal that the origin of extreme and racist thinking

and structures can be located in ordinary socio-political, socio-economic and social-cultural conditions (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2015; Varela/Mecheril 2018).

Although many teachers emphasize the relevance to teach about racism in social-studies classrooms, "many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching about race, period." (Brown/Brown 2011, p. 10) In Germany, most states do not stress the topics of racism and discrimination in their curricula and teaching about race and racism rather takes place in extracurricular education (cf. Elverich/Scherr 2017). This observation also applies to other countries like the U.S.: "The official curriculum tends either to ignore these concepts or to dilute their complexity or significance." (King et al. 2018) King et al. argue that one reason why teachers feel uncomfortable is because "we lack a common racial literacy" (King et al. 2018, p. 316).

When students hold presentations in social-studies classrooms they can stress certain topics. Laura for example examines the case of the shooting of Michael Brown and tries to speak about and define racism not only in U.S. contexts: By connecting the case of Michael Brown with German social realities Laura grasps racism as a global problem that needs to be discussed and criticized. While holding her presentation, Laura is the mainspring to discuss racism. Thus, presentations are significant for students to address topics in social-studies classrooms that are ignored or marginalized in curricula – such as racism.

### 3 Knowledge, presentations and pointing

Presentations put students – like Laura – in a central role in the production of knowledge: the interplay of speech, gestures and slides constitutes knowledge in the situation of a presentation (cf. Adams 2006; Idel/Rabenstein 2013). Thus, presentations emphasize the communicative actions of students who are put into a situation that is unique in the classroom – they should take over the process of pointing: "PowerPoint enhances, quite literally, the ability or power to point." (Adams 2006, p. 398) The presenting students significantly influence the way in which knowledge is presented and they influence the mediation of knowledge.

Despite the frequent use in everyday school life, little is known about the didactic functions of presentations and there are no detailed case studies on presentations in social-studies classrooms so far. Lesson plans conceive presentations as a teaching method independent of the content (cf. Vallance/Towndrow 2007). That is why presentations have often been criticized for promoting a so-called disposal of the content (cf. Gruschka 2011) focusing rather on competences than on topics. But it is not just competences that matter: Presentations are "event[s] [that] integrate technology, audiences, and presenters" (Knoblauch 2013, p. 19). This concept is called performance:

"The action of presenting slides to an audience by a speaker – its performance – bestows meanings and thus situationally creates knowledge not inscribed or encoded in the documents [like slides, S.T.]. Performance as the embodied form of communication in time, rather, adds corporeality and sociality, and with it time, space, and new meaning to the information." (Knoblauch 2013, p. 20)

Hence, it is relevant to focus on the content of a presentation or, more precisely, on the process *how* content is *formed* in a presentation.

Presentations are directed – socially – to others, a process that Weber calls social actions (cf. Doolittle/Hicks 2003; Berger/Luckmann 1966/2013; Weber 1922/1980). Social actions are key concepts for social constructivism to define knowledge: "Knowledge is not a mirror image of reality." (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 82) The foundation of the social-constructivist approach



rather is that "the construction of knowledge and the making of meaning are individually and socially active processes" (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 83). Presentations represent this understanding of knowledge in particular: This – the presentation of knowledge by students in front of others, the follow-up discussion which is "a backseat to socially agreed upon ways of carving up reality" (Prawat 1996, p. 220) – is "where knowledge construction occurs" (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 80).

In order to negotiate topics in the classroom, teachers usually *point* to topics: Prange (cf. 2012) calls pointing the main operation of didactics. Thus, a topic that is negotiated in society is *re-presented* in the classroom (cf. Grammes 1998 & 2012). In this respect, the content is not technically mediated but rather didactically transformed. The didactic transformation of the topic should lead students to a learning process, that ideally promotes Bildung:

"It proposes that Bildung should be perceived as an experience that the subject [that is the student, S.T.] comes out of changed; a change which not only affects one's thinking, but rather the subject's relation to the world, to others, and to itself." (Koller 2017, p. 33)

By transferring the act of pointing to students, topics are addressed in a different manner. This not only affects the general structure of lessons but also the transformation of political topics.

#### 4 The model of knowledge forms

In order to analyze the dynamics of knowledge processes in the classroom, a didactic definition of knowledge is required. For teaching in social-studies classrooms, it is not only important to re-present the topic through pointing, but also to consider how and in what *form* the topic should be addressed. Therefore, teachers need to differentiate between different knowledge forms. They have to ask: Under what perspectives should the topic be dealt with?

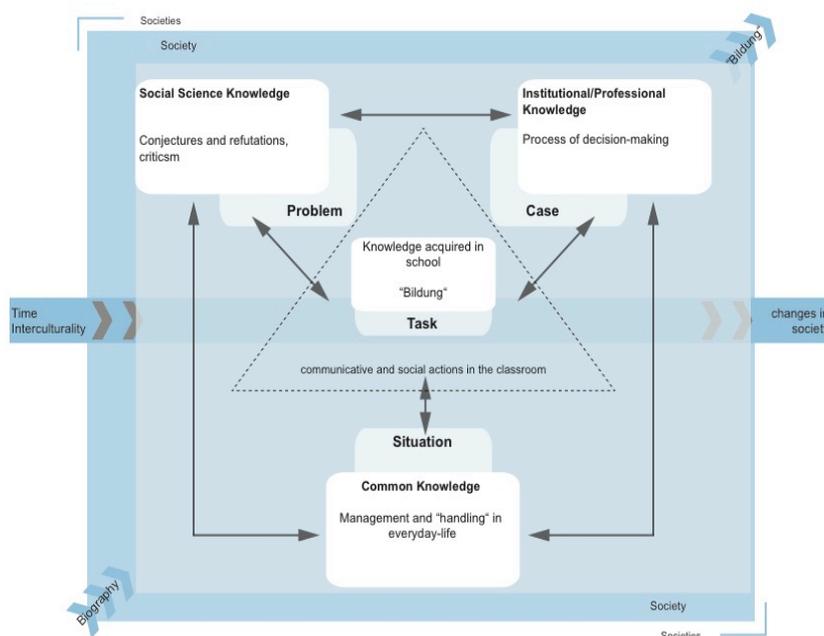


Fig. 1: Model of knowledge forms according to Tilman Grammes (1998, p. 70), translated from German into English.

The model of knowledge forms (cf. Grammes 1998, p. 70; Petrik 2017, p. 182) emphasizes differences of perspectives as the central didactic category and focuses on transformation processes of knowledge. A topic can be staged in many ways: is it about common knowledge or a situation of everyday life that is to be introduced in the classroom? Should a current political case be addressed? Is it about an analysis of a problem that affects society as a whole? These questions reflect different ways of accessing a topic in social-studies classrooms. Nevertheless, all modes of access are part of society, but there is a didactical difference with regard to specific contexts – a situation, a case, or a problem.

Circling back to example of 10<sup>th</sup> grade student Laura, it makes a difference whether racism is addressed (i) as a *situation*, for example experiences of the students with racism in their everyday lives and the way they *handle* them; (ii) as a political *case*, for example the shooting of Michael Brown and the following lawsuit against the police officer which requires a *decision*; or (iii) as a *problem*, exemplified by Laura's central question "To what extent does racism trigger police violence?", that addresses structural causes of racism which can be *researched* and *criticized*.

Through the act of pointing, teachers develop a specific perspective on the content. With the three forms of knowledge – common, institutional, social-science knowledge – teachers develop tasks which should lead to a learning process. The model uses the Didactic Triangle (in the background of the model) as the fundamental concept of teaching. The arrows represent the didactic act of pointing. The model of knowledge forms can be used as a tool for preparing and analyzing social-studies lessons (cf. Grammes 2016).

The model understands knowledge in a sociological and socio-constructivist way: In general, knowledge is linked to action. In social relations – such as PowerPoint presentations – ideas of the individuals shape knowledge by legitimizing and meaningfully selecting and justifying it. Knowledge is no external category that is beyond reach for individuals but rather individuals constitute knowledge and social reality through actions (cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966/2013): "Thus, constructivism emphasizes the active role played by the individual learner in the construction of knowledge [and, S.T.] the primacy of social and individual experience in the process of learning". (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 78) The model visualizes the 'action of presentation' and the social 'making of knowledge'. It helps to differentiate didactically between different processes of legitimization and justification of knowledge, such as the process of decision-making in the context of cases or the 'handling' of everyday-life situations (cf. Grammes 2016).

The model focuses on the operative logic of teaching (cf. Meseth et al. 2012; Proske 2015), which produces a certain social order of teaching through the cooperation of teachers and students: Operative, in this case, means that the structure of the lesson is determined through communicative actions – depicted in the center of the Didactic Triangle. Thus, knowledge can be reconstructed in presentations, since the communicative actions are constitutional for the construction of social-studies lessons.

The empirical study was divided into two parts. In the first part presentations were recorded in the classroom; slides, transcripts of students and teachers as well as planning notes were obtained. In the second part the students and teachers were invited to listen to the recorded presentations in an interview. They provided their views, impressions and opinions on the lesson and on the subject of the presentation.

Both parts were combined in a revised transcript and were interpreted with the didactic model of knowledge forms described above. This evaluation method interprets the transcript hermeneutically (sequence analysis) and focuses on actions: The objective was the reconstruction of the social meaning of interaction and specific kinds of communication in the classroom. (cf. Reichertz 2007) This method which uses the model of knowledge form as the centerpiece to reconstruct learning processes in social-studies classrooms is called "Wissensdidaktische Hermeneutik" (cf. Torrau 2018).

### 5 "I mean, everybody is kinda racist." Student's didactic actions in presentations

The following excerpts contain the interaction in the classroom during and after a presentation and the political controversy surrounding the issue of racism. The lesson was recorded in November 2015 in a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade class in social-studies with 23 students and the class and subject teacher, Mr. Mueller. Mr. Mueller has been teaching the class for several years in sports and social studies. In the last few weeks the class dealt with the Weimar Republic, Nazi-Germany and the Second World War, as well as the current debate about refugees and right-wing extremism. At the moment, presentations are being held. All students chose their topics on their own.

Today, Laura, a 15-year-old Afro-German, holds a presentation and presents her topic – racism and police violence using the example of the shooting of Michael Brown – in the final lesson of the day. Her presentation starts after an hour-long lunch break.

The teacher announces at the beginning of the lesson that Laura's is a "very serious topic". He briefly mentions that the presentation is about "racism in the US" and that the lesson follows the typical, ritualized pattern: (i) the presentation is held followed by (ii) a discussion and (iii) a feedback for the presenter.

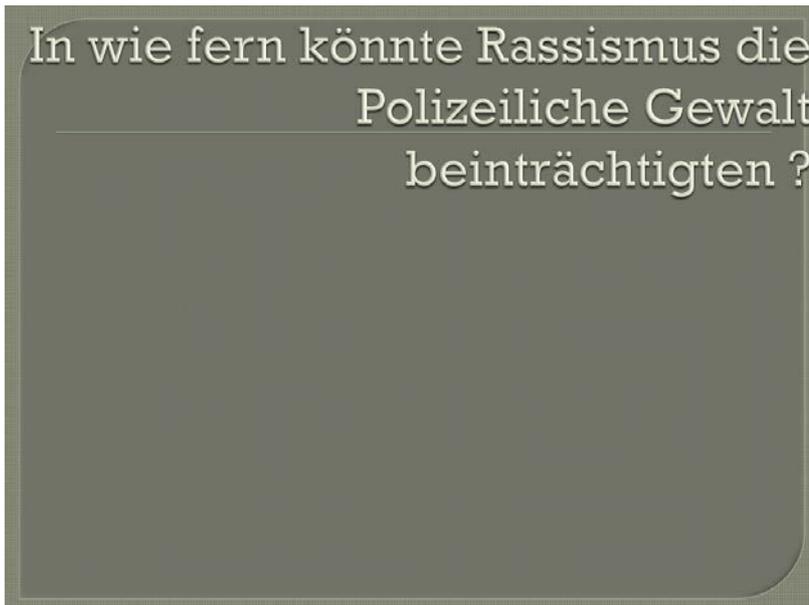
After a brief overview of the lesson given by Mr. Mueller Laura introduces the topic to the class starting with the following slide:<sup>3</sup>



[The slide reads: Police violence (Ferguson)]

Laura: "So, my topic is police violence in the US, especially the shooting of Michael Brown."

The slide shows a protester of the "Black Lives Matter" movement on a demonstration in Oakland, CA, following a decision by a grand jury not to open a criminal case against the police officer who shot Michael Brown (cf. Ransby 2018). Laura says, that her presentation is about "police violence in the US". Subsequently, she reads her central question to the audience:



[The slide reads: To what extent does racism trigger police violence?]

Laura: [Next slide] So, I start with my central question which is: To what extent does racism trigger police violence?

With her central question Laura takes a specific perspective on "racism": She stresses the topic of "police violence" and examines the shooting of Michael Brown to answer the central question of the presentation. The act of pointing is transferred to Laura: by asking questions, Laura develops the topic of racism. The presentation is not about racist comments on Twitter nor the change of communication on the internet. Neither is it about the strengthening of right-wing parties and their effect on the party system in Germany – although these questions would also address racism.

Within the scope of the model of knowledge forms, her question transforms the content specifically: Her perspective shows an approach of a political *case* (shooting of Michael Brown) as well as a social and political *problem* (racism in police action in the US in general) that goes beyond the case of Michael Brown. Thus, Laura transforms knowledge in two ways: she specifically mentions the case of Michael Brown and addresses the problem of racism on an abstract sociological level. With her lead question Laura renders racism not as "simple acts of individual prejudices" (King et al. 2018, p. 318) but rather examines racism in its socially constructed structures (connection between "police violence" and "racism").

In the interview after the presentation Laura says about her choice of the topic:

Laura: "Uh, just because I'm interested in it and I mean, it isn't that extreme like in the US, but that's what it's like in Germany sometimes, too. And I just wanted to deal with it, because it's kind of, it is about me, too [Laura is an Afro-German, S.T.], and about the world, how it works with racism and so on. That is why, I was just interested in the topic." (Interview Laura)

Laura's choice of the topic is influenced both by her interest in the case of Michael Brown and by her understanding of "the world, how it works with racism". Laura contextualizes the topic from different perspectives, which reveals a complex process of pointing: Firstly, through her own interest ("it is about me"), Laura deals with the topic in her *everyday life* (common knowledge) and transfers her personal interest into her presentation topic – she "just wanted to deal with it". Thus, she chose a *case* that interested and affected her. Going beyond her own experiences with racism, she develops another perspective through the case of Michael Brown. Thirdly, she also takes a socio-scientific perspective by pointing out the transnational significance of racism ("that's what it's like in Germany, too"), pointing at racism as a political and social *problem*.

These relations lead to the central question: "To what extent does racism trigger police violence?" The different aspects of the topic (situation, case, problem) are connected – especially for Laura herself – and are translated into the presentation. Laura contextualizes the topic in a way in which she can identify a "racial structure" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1360) that goes beyond individual mindsets and prejudices.

Shortly afterwards, Laura presents the circumstances of the crime for which she uses a series of pictures of the shootings of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, who was also shot unarmed by a member of a neighborhood watch:



Laura: So [next slide], this is Michael Brown, this is how he lay on the ground. And a lot of pictures were taken, that was one of them.

An image appears on the digital board in the classroom. Mr. Mueller and the students can see a corpse lying on a street: "So, this is Michael Brown, this is how he lay on the ground," says Laura. Using that image, she introduces Michael Brown to her presentation and immediately adds that he lay on the ground after the shooting. She also says that the picture shown here is one of many pictures.

By showing the picture of the dead body of Michael Brown it becomes crystal clear, that 'race' as "an invented concept" (King et al. 2015, p. 318) is "real for those who are victim to the social construct's manifestations in actions and thoughts, and to the systems that have been created to oppress and privilege certain groups of people" (loc. cit.).<sup>4</sup>

In the interview Laura answers to the question, why she chose the picture:

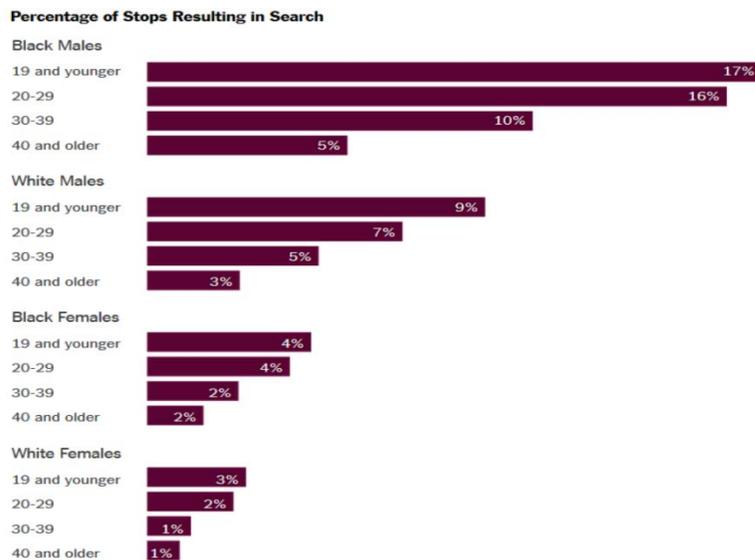
Laura: "This picture [slide with Michael Brown, S.T.], yeah, simply, because it is simply genuine and this is exactly the way, how he lay on the ground. That is why, I simply wanted to [stress, S.T.] the importance, and that it didn't happen just like that but that it really needs to be taken seriously what's going on in America. Well, somehow I cannot play down what exactly happened there." (Interview Laura)

The presentation of the pictures serves to enable the students and Mr. Mueller to get an accurate idea of the events. The photos are used for the documentation of the events, they mirror the actions that happened in the streets of Ferguson, according to Laura. It becomes clear that she did not choose the photos arbitrarily – they carry social reality into the classroom: She says that the picture is "genuine", it visualizes social reality: "This is exactly the way, how he lay on the ground." On the one hand, the exact representation of the shooting of Michael Brown in the presentation stresses the "importance" of these events which Laura already highlighted when choosing her topic. On the other hand, Laura argues that the explicitness of the picture precludes a reading of *objective, unalterable* reality: "It didn't happen just like that." Laura identifies and contextualizes racism as a socially constructed concept: The photo can "serve as a catalyst to help students critically consider the nature and impact of race in the U.S." (Brown/Brown 2011, p. 11) and in the world which is due to actions of individuals in existing socio-political, socio-economic and social-cultural conditions.

She says about her presentation that the selected images were used to *point* at an important topic: "That it really needs to be taken seriously what's going on in America." Laura identifies the problem as a result of a social construct (racism) and points to the problem based on this political case (shooting of Michael Brown). The students and Mr. Mueller do not only see the image itself, but also the importance of dealing with racially motivated crimes in the United States: The image could trigger an irritation, it is a wake-up call.

Laura proves this by presenting the case of Trayvon Martin. By doing this Laura emphasizes that there is omnipresent racism that goes beyond the case of Michael Brown – her presentation is a structural analysis.

Following a brief account of the police officer's trial and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Laura uses charts to answer her central question. The following chart shows road checks in the US by ethnicity (black/white), sex (male/female) and age, and was published in the New York Times.<sup>5</sup>



Source: Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp and Bayard Love, U.N.C. Chapel Hill Department of Political Science

Laura: Okay, yeah. As you can see, racism might trigger police violence. It also happens quite often, that is why there are quite a lot of cases like Michael Brown's or, or Trayvon Martin's [...] And this is [pointing at the chart], for example, when you're stopped in road traffic or something like that in America [...] so most of the time dark-skinned, male Americans are stopped the most.

Laura cites the chart as evidence ("as you can see") that "racism might trigger police violence". Laura verifies the connection of police violence and racism and answers her question from the perspective of social science by relying on empirical data (visualized by the charts). It is no longer just about the case of the shooting of Michael Brown – even though the strong and emotionally laden pictures support her argument – because now Laura focuses on a general social context: "It also happens quite often, so there are quite a lot of cases like Michael Brown's or Trayvon Martin's." Her presentation represents a process of legitimization of knowledge in the classroom: "Knowledge acquisition and meaning making cannot simply be transferred or transmitted from one individual or group of individuals to another." (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 83) Due to the verification of her lead question in front of her classmates and her teacher, meaning-making and the construction of knowledge are "active social processes of social negotiation [and, S.T.] shared discourse" (Doolittle/Hicks 2003, p. 84). The presentation is the starting point of this process.

At this point, the presentation is not about one specific *decision* made in a trial but about *conjectures* and *criticism*: The diagram that Laura chose deals with the police road traffic inspections, situations similar to that of Michael Brown's: "So most of the time dark-skinned, male Americans are stopped the most." Laura draws rudimentarily a connection that is also relevant in academic papers:

"Where there are large Black populations, high unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, and an active underground economy, there is heavy-handed policing, which takes different forms. So-called broken windows policing, a racist and highly flawed model, has been the modus operandi of the Chicago and New York police forces and many others across the country for years. The supposed logic maintains that smaller, seemingly benign offenses portend serious crimes, and tackling the former will prevent the latter. In other words, there is criminal behav-

ior and 'precriminal' behavior. This mind-set sets the stage for racial profiling and harassment of entire groups of people, who 'might' be headed toward serious crimes. Michael Brown's treatment at the hands of Ferguson police is an example of where this approach can lead: a petty, or perceived, infraction leads to confrontation and deadly results." (Ransby 2018, p. 68)

Laura's findings and theses lead to an intense discussion in the social-studies classroom. The presentation becomes "a springboard to discussion" (Adams 2006, p. 403). The following part shows the interaction in the classroom after the presentation and the political controversy surrounding the issue of racism.



[The slide reads: Thank you for listening.]

The students applaud at the end of the presentation and the teacher, Mr. Mueller, takes over starting a classroom discussion using the image last shown in Laura's presentation:

Teacher: Nice picture here [reads]: "Black Lives Matter." What does that mean?

Duhan: I don't know what "matter" means.

Teacher: Yes, Laura [Laura raises her hand], I know that you know. Can anybody else tell me what this English phrase means?

Duhan: Clara?!

Clara: Why me?

Teacher: Well, Clara, you know it, too. [Student: "Lives of Blacks are also important."] Yes, correct. Black lives...

Laura: ...matter. [Student: "Yes."]

Teacher: [...] Okay, questions, observations, comments. I'm sure there is something you can say about it, right?! Questions, observations, comments. Apply it to the topic, what is it about, socially? [...]

Jonathan: Well for example there also are black police officers, uhm, are they also discriminated against by their white colleagues or somethin' like that? And, is there also, do black police officers also discriminate against Whites? Rather not, right?

Laura: *[some laughter]* Sorry, I didn't listen.

Teacher: That's a good question that Jonathan asked, right?!

Anthony: *[to Laura]* If Whites uhm... the colored police officers discriminate against Whites?

Lara: If there is racism going the other way, so to speak.

Laura: How? What? Whites are... I don't know.

Teacher: More questions, first we collect, we try to bundle the questions a little bit.

Laura: It probably happens, I mean, everybody is kinda racist.

Teacher: Can you ... again ... well, everybody is somehow a racist? *[Maurice, ironically to Laura: "Are you trying to offend me?"]*

Laura: Yes.

Teacher: What exactly do you mean?

Laura: *[to Maurice]* NO, well not everybody is a racist, but uhm...

Teacher: I know, that you mean something specific, you mean that everybody has *[Lara: "Everybody has some prejudice."] some subtle prejudice maybe or something like that?*

Laura: Yes, I don't mean racist, like really bad, I rather mean generally, we've all got it in us.

Laura comments on the lesson:

Laura: "What Jonathan said upset me most."

Interviewer: "Do you remember what he said?"

Laura: "Yes! That racism against uh Americans or Europeans, well, that Blacks discriminate against White. That was something that he like... mentioned. Well, we were just talkin' about [...] problems for colored people in the US and then he talked about how Whites are treated in the United States. That's why... I didn't think it was very considerate." (Interview Laura)

After the attempt to translate and clarify the meaning of the English phrase (and movement) "Black Lives Matter" (cf. Ransby 2018) Mr. Mueller asks the students for „questions, observations, comments“ and specifies this request further by adding: „What is it about, socially?“

Mr. Mueller links his question – from a didactic point of view (cf. the model of knowledge forms) – to the social-scientific conclusion of the presentation and poses the guiding question for the discussion from this perspective. It is neither about the case of the shooting of Michael Brown nor about personal experiences or opinions of the students, but rather what the shooting of Michael Brown "is about *socially*": This question could move the discussion into a social-scientific field. With the help of the presentation, the students should identify a structural *problem* which is relevant for society. At the same time the students are encouraged to ask

"questions" and formulate "observations and comments" themselves that could evoke other contexts such as personal experiences in everyday life situations. The teacher is undecided whether to work out a problem on the one hand or to discuss spontaneously given comments by students on the other hand. The argument from Laura that the charts are evidence that racism "might trigger police violence" is not contested, and therefore it can be read as accepting her central findings.

In class, the need for clarification of the aim of the discussion becomes obvious. Jonathan asks Laura two questions: First, if "black police officers" are "discriminated against by their white colleagues" and then, if "black police officers also discriminate against Whites". In the interview it becomes clear that Jonathan's question annoys Laura: His question "upset" her the "most" and in Laura's opinion it was not "very considerate" to talk about how „Whites are treated in the United States“ after listening to her presentation. Laura stresses in the interview that her presentation was about "problems" of "colored people". Laura reacts to Jonathan's question with incomprehension: "How? What? Whites are... I don't know." This scene illustrates how the importance of the content of the topic of racism grew from talking about the case of Michael Brown and racism in the US, to also becoming personally significant for the students – for example for Laura as an Afro-German – themselves: Laura wants or can not answer this question: "I don't know."

Nevertheless, Laura takes up – after a brief invitation of the teacher to ask "more questions" – the comment expressed by Jonathan and formulates the core of the upcoming discussion: "It probably happens, I mean, everybody is kinda racist." Laura no longer argues socio-scientifically, as she did in her conclusion using the charts. Now, with this statement she locates racism on the level of everyday life by expressing experiences and/or personal opinions as a declarative sentence ("Everybody is kinda...") and thus addressing her classmates directly ("Are you trying to offend me?").

Mr. Mueller is surprised by Laura's statement ("Can you ... again ... well, everybody is somehow a racist?") and asks for clarification ("What exactly do you mean?"). Laura puts her statement in perspective ("I don't mean racist, like really bad") after Mr. Mueller tries to reconstruct that Laura "means something specific" – the teacher tries to defuse the statement ("subtle prejudice"). Laura, nevertheless, concludes: "I rather mean generally, we've all got it in us."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Laura invites the audience to further discuss the issue of racism in the classroom and to deal with the question of racism in society. Laura creates a "teachable moment" (Brown/Brown 2011, p. 11) about racism and provocatively invites her classmates to talk about the topic because she connects current events and social-cultural conditions with the "social realities" (loc. cit.) of the students and Mr. Mueller: "To put it simply, race and racism are already explicitly and implicitly part of the students' lives" (Brown/Brown 2011, p. 12) and Laura stresses that connection. Thus, Laura – as a student – models the social-studies lesson significantly: To talk about and reflect on racism is everyone's business.

Laura's presentation in general and particularly her results lead to an intense discussion. Laura expresses her everyday life observation as a statement which her classmates will refer to their own experiences. From a didactic point of view, Laura establishes a direct connection between the problem of racism in society and the everyday life situations of her classmates. In short, Laura *points* at this connection through communicative actions. Thus, her classmates discuss an important question for every society: What is racism and how is it expressed in everyday life situations and society in general? The 10<sup>th</sup> graders discuss what racism is about, in Germany and in the world, they discuss their own experiences with racist insults including

forms of "New racism" (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2015), struggling with the ambiguity of political and social knowledge – brought up in Laura's presentation who points at an important topic and as a result encourages her classmates to gain "racial literacy" (cf. King et al. 2018). Not only her last slide reads "Black Lives Matter", her whole presentation is a wake-up call that "All Black Lives Matter" (Ransby 2018) and that racism is a structural problem which affects every society and therefore needs to be addressed and discussed.

## 6 Conclusion

When students hold presentations they transform knowledge, because they act didactically. The distinguishing feature of the method is that during the presentation, the act of pointing will be transmitted from the teacher to the student.

Since the results are presented to others, a process of social legitimization of knowledge is triggered – teachers and classmates discuss the acquired knowledge controversially.

Presentations are a method of producing knowledge in society:

"The legitimization of knowledge is no abstract process; it is rather embedded in the event of a presentation, since it is prepared and performed by the speaker (or presenter) with the technology [in front of an, S.T.] audience who take the presenter and speaker to represent knowledge." (Knoblauch 2013, p. 20)

Hence, presentations are used as a teaching method in class in order to explore the socio-constructivist constitution of knowledge in social sciences.

This is relevant for teaching in social-studies classrooms and for students to learn about the importance of social actions (cf. Weber 1922/1980). Students can explore this central aspect *explicitly* through presentations and learn how to act didactically themselves:

First, students prepare for a presentation, they deal with sources such as articles or videos on the topic, they decide what is important, they choose a central question and work out results such as Laura who is personally involved and wants to send a message to her classmates. Therefore, students use knowledge that has been objectivated through communication processes (for example sources like a chart) in society and re-present it in their presentations: Laura, for instance, re-presents the exact sequence of events of the shooting of Michael Brown. However, the presented knowledge is specifically transformed by the key question and the acts of pointing – Laura points out, that there is a connection between police violence and racism albeit she could have come to another conclusion.

Second, presentations always lead to *discussions*. Mr. Mueller tells his students to comment on the topic. The presenters discuss the represented and transformed knowledge of the presentation with others: For example, the results of Laura's presentation and especially her statement „Everybody is kinda racist“ that came up through questions by her classmates.

Third, students and teachers can therefore discuss and deal with the results and statements of presentations and decide together what is right and what is wrong; for example what comments in everyday life are racist and if or in what way "everybody is kinda racist".

It is a *ritualized* process that takes place during every presentation. This process is especially important when teaching and learning about racism because it can expose racism as a socially invented category. In social-studies classrooms, the concept of racism can be challenged and criticized due to a socio-constructivist understanding of knowledge that presentations foster. Students learn how to act didactically themselves and hence learn about the *social making* of knowledge in social-sciences.



This is an indicator of change in the culture of teaching because the act of pointing is transmitted from the teacher to the students. Students thus have a great influence on what knowledge is presented and they have influence on co-designing school curricula in *action* (cf. Young/Lambert 2014). Thus, students are actively involved in the constitution of "powerful knowledge" (loc. cit.); Laura brings up a topic which is not part of the official curriculum and thus decisively shapes the construction of knowledge in the classroom. For teaching, these findings mean that the task to hold a presentation can be staged and used in pedagogical practice. Students can grasp a key concept of the construction of knowledge: In social sciences, knowledge cannot be transmitted technically but rather is mediated through social and communicative actions – it is an active social process.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Didactics* is a term used in German-speaking articles to stress the difference between pedagogical and didactic actions in school and lessons. By using the term didactics, I can focus on the *subject* of lessons, on the *transformation* of knowledge which is different from subject to subject and on curricula in which official knowledge is determined.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I use the term *pointing* didactically. In this sense, pointing is the central action in lessons to transform knowledge and to develop learning processes.

<sup>3</sup> The following excerpts are translated from German. Laura uses a photo for her presentation: Source: cf. Sim, D. (2014): Black Lives Matter: Ferguson protests in Oakland, New York and Other US Cities. International Business Times (Online-Ausgabe UK): <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/black-lives-matter-ferguson-protests-oakland-new-york-other-us-cities-1476525> [02.02.2016]. Laura uses this photo again on the last slide.

<sup>4</sup> Publishing and printings those pictures is a controversial and contentious topic (cf. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/magazine/media-bodies-censorship.html>). The disrespectful and inhumane treatment of Michael Brown's corpse by leaving him uncovered in the streets of Ferguson should not be downplayed. The author is aware that an uncommented and isolated publishing of those pictures can lead to a further dehumanization of the victims of racist crimes. Ransby criticizes: "Michael Brown's lifeless body was left in the middle of Canfield Avenue as crowds gathered and news of the latest murder spread by cell phone, texts, and Twitter. This callous disregard for Brown's basic humanity had 'Black Lives DON'T Matter written all over it.'" (Ransby 2018, p. 48) To criticize that inhumane treatment, Laura chooses to show this picture to her classmates and her teacher. I support Laura in showing that picture as a wake-up call to deconstruct racial structures in society. But I decided not to publish the picture in this text. In this article, a blank slide is published instead.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Opiel Jr., R. A. (2014): Activists Wield Search Data to Challenge and Change Police Policy. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/us/activists-wield-search-data-to-challenge-and-change-police-policy.html> [02.02.2016].

<sup>6</sup> With another interpretation of this sequence one could argue that the teacher provides further misunderstandings und misconceptions about racism with his questions and comments: One could argue, that instead of helping facilitate the conversation and to help push students in their thinking about race the questions and comments instead allowed for "white tears" to dominate the conversation and make it about them instead of the subject of Laura's presentation: Black Lives Matter and police violence against Black Americans.

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