



Potentials and Challenges in Redesigning Traditional Text Seminars in Doctoral Education in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The text seminar has a long and strong tradition in academia, not least in postgraduate education. In these seminars, doctoral students are socialised into the research community to be able to act as researchers in an academic setting. However, research suggests that the traditional and strictly regulated form of doctoral seminars may hinder doctoral students' learning. In response to this problem, this article presents and discusses an analysis of an attempt to redesign doctoral education seminars in Sweden by a design theoretic approach to learning. The result shows that while certain seminar forms functioned as somewhat limiting for learning, other forms and multimodal resources were able to open for alternative meaning-making and ways of staging the identity of a researcher.

Keywords: *postgraduate; seminars; design; identity*

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Introduction

The point of departure in this article is that learning is a social meaning-making process relative to social practices where various modes and resources play important roles, and that this also applies to learning to become a researcher. However, there is a lack of research with this perspective in doctoral education. International literature on doctoral education is mainly focused on effective supervision (Åkerlind & McAlphine, 2017), which is regarded as successful doctoral education (Bengtson, 2016). In a critical literature review of research on doctoral supervision, published in the past 20 years within the UK, Australia, Sweden and the Netherlands, Bastalich

(2017) problematises the dominant focus on supervision, pointing to the need for a greater emphasis on the social context. And as observed by Blessinger and Stockley (2016), as well as Hasgall and Peneosu (2022), doctoral students are situated in rapidly evolving programs requiring new forms of thinking and learning. Therefore, we need to pay close attention to the socialisation of doctoral students (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018).

The traditional seminar is furthermore described as problematic. The intricate game of giving and taking criticism may take time to understand, and a doctoral student who does not abide to the current expectations, thus insufficiently performing the researcher's role, is at risk of being reprimanded for this, either openly or through subtle markers via body language or telling looks (Peixoto, 2014). In an overview of literature on doctoral student experience, Carter et al. (2020) identify lack of confidence as one of the top contributions to mental health distress. Doctoral students in the UK describe reluctance to take the risk of speaking in seminars due to self-doubts about their own capacity (Leonard & Becker, 2009). Similarly, Green and Lee (1995) have described the doctoral seminar as a powerful performance where the students watch and learn how to speak and behave.

According to previous research, it thus seems doctoral education programs need to adopt a broader perspective regarding students' skills. Walker et al. (2009) observe that in the U.S., much is unchanged from generation to generation, and Schnaas (2016) makes similar observations regarding the unchanged ritual character of the doctoral seminar in Sweden. However, there are some suggestions for a more innovative design for learning that could benefit doctoral education. For example, Barnett and Coate (2005) develop their idea of *engagement* in a curriculum calling for students' involvement and action. They argue that students need to be provided with a *space* where they can express and develop their *voice*. They also use the metaphor of *play*, in the sense that smiles and laughter may break through, as well as play in the sense of not taking oneself too seriously.

Against the background of the previous research reported above, the purpose of the present study is to examine the outcomes of redesigning text seminars aiming to enhance doctoral students' ability to learn how to participate and engage themselves as researchers, navigating within the academic field. In line with Konnerup et al. (2019), we suggest that learning design can be used as innovative opportunities when developing higher education.

Our redesign has been elaborated through working with modalities which are on the one hand central to research, but on the other hand usually not accommodated in the academic sphere. The question addressed in this article is: What potentials and challenges do various modalities and resources offer doctoral students' meaning-making and capacity to act when attempting to redesign the traditional text seminar form to involve bodily, affective, and creative qualities? The research analysis is based on written doctoral student reflections, photographs, and recorded

self-reflexive conversations between the two of us, all produced in connection to the redesign attempt process.

A design-oriented approach to learning

In line with Kress (2003, 2010) and Selander (2008) we apply a design-theoretic approach to learning and teaching, where learning is viewed as a process of enhancing one's capacity for acting in the world. The approach entails a focus on the ongoing meaning-making in social interaction where humans represent themselves articulated by a wide range of modes such as gestures, postures, and body movements (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011), which together with language is used to convey power and status (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). And since all interaction is about communicating with others in a certain context, the role of agency and distribution of power is highly relevant (Kress & Selander, 2011). This view on learning is closely connected to the concept of subjectification (Biesta, 2020), where empowering the students' critical voice is important. The concept of *design* enables alternative approaches to issues of recognition and access (Kress, 2014). Objects, gestures, words, sounds, movements, and symbols are given sense and signification in the social contexts in which they are used. In a traditional academic doctoral text seminar, *physical* resources are limited to what is available at a specific location, usually amounting to a few tables, chairs, perhaps a whiteboard and a projector. The *multimodal* resources at hand to interpret the world—sounds, gestures, movements, surfaces, colour scales, as well as creativity, improvisation, and playfulness—are also possible resources for pedagogy to consider. In the context of the present study, *framing* becomes a central concept (Selander, 2008). Teaching, including doctoral seminars, is framed by physical resources and ideological conceptions, and is maintained by an expected distribution of roles. Taken together, *design for learning* can be seen as a transformative process, in which resources for meaning-making change through an *orchestration*, or *staging*, of *form* and content (Kress, 2003). Levine (2015) notes that in academia, aesthetic and social arrangements are routinely treated as two distinct phenomena, where the aesthetic is seen in terms of “form” and the social in terms of “structure.” She wants to broaden the concept of form from this narrow use to instead include forms as being both aesthetic and social. Different forms, Levine points out, offer different possibilities and limitations.

Method

Like design-based research, our redesign attempt aimed to create an improvement in a local practice, situated in a real educational context (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). The analysis was directed towards the reflective process of redesigning doctoral text seminars. In conjunction with the seminars, we have continuously used different forms of qualitative data as a basis for our analysis, including written

doctoral student reflections, photographs, participant observations and recorded self-reflexive conversations between the two of us.

The data was produced over a period of three years (autumn 2015–2018). Taking a design-theoretic approach, communication, materiality and form were in focus when designing six seminars. In seminar I–III a researcher gave an introductory lecture on a theoretical concept, after which 5–6 panellists briefly described how they used this concept in their research. Meanwhile, the audience wrote questions on sticky notes which were collected and categorised, forming a basis for thematised questions that we the seminar leaders then asked the lecturer and the panellists. In seminar IV the participants formed two discussion groups to single out key aspects for conceptual understandings in articles they had read beforehand and noted keywords on sticky notes. All participants then collectively formed a mind map by grouping all the notes into clusters on a whiteboard. Seminar V was held in a larger room with several levels and a high ceiling. As a preparation, each participant read an article of their choice about the concept in question. At the seminar, they formed groups of 2–3 to prepare imagined conversations between the authors of the specific texts that each participant in that group had read. These imagined conversations were performed in front of the other groups, making use of the whole room and props in the form of hats, shawls, shirts and other things. During seminar VI, we staged a debate with the aim of creating a dynamic conversation exploring the relation between research methods and possible conclusions. Prior to the seminar, each participants read an article of their choice related to the topic of the seminar, and prepared to use the article's arguments in the debate.

Table 1. Seminar overview

Seminar	Design	Seminar participants	Room
I–III	Lecture, panellists, auditorium	8 doctoral students, 2 senior researchers/ seminar leaders, 1 lecturer, 5–6 panellists, 15–20 university teachers/ researchers/students in auditorium	Larger lecture hall
IV	Collective workshop	8 doctoral students, 2 senior researchers/seminar leaders	Regular university classroom
V	Performance	8 doctoral students, 2 senior researchers/ seminar leaders, 2 university teachers	A larger room with several levels and a high ceiling
VI	Debate	8 doctoral students, 2 senior researchers/seminar leaders	Regular university classroom

The data includes observations, written doctoral student reflections obtained in conjunction with the seminars and in the final phase of the project, photographs taken during seminars, and a longer recorded self-reflexive conversations between the two

of us where we summarised our observations. Eight doctoral students participated in the study. Additional participants, e.g., invited lecturers, were rather part of the seminar context. The study follows the general ethical standards approved by the Swedish Research Council (2017). The eight doctoral students were given oral information about the study, and signed a consent to participate by being observed and photographed during seminars and by giving written reflections. We used photographs as a basis for our own conversations in the analysis process, rather than a basis for the informants' stories or a tool for the informants.

In the analysis we put attention to reflections on the outcomes observed when different multimodal resources were offered in the seminars. Reflexivity is a central methodological concept which is enacted differently by scholars, but typically the term refers to the researchers' reflectiveness about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the results they generate (Bryman, 2004, p. 500). We practiced reflection in the analysis through conversations between us researchers on several occasions continuously throughout the project, and in a longer (1 hour and 22 minutes), more meticulous and self-reflexive conversation between the two of us in the final phase of the project. The longer conversation was audio recorded and formed the basis for the final analysis. We realise that our own involvement in the seminars may have influenced our interpretations. Therefore, we have strived to develop a self-critical approach to our own preconceived notions (Alvesson, 2002), continually testing different interpretations. In addition, our involvement in the redesign attempt studied requires an explicit and transparent presentation of the result. In the present article we have therefore deliberately chosen to give generous space to the results in relation to the other sections.

Findings

The reflective analysis of the data focused on possibilities and limitations in relation to the different resources, modalities and forms offered by the redesign of the seminars. The findings are presented in terms of staging aspects, referring to how form and content were orchestrated. These aspects are structured by the thematic headings of working with hierarchies, levels, and positions; movement and dynamics; spatial arrangements of content; figuration and improvisation; and with playfulness, creativity, and imagination.

Working with hierarchies, levels, and positions

Our work involved experiments to unsettle the hierarchical form and increase doctoral students' agency. Recurring positions in our sessions were those of seminar leaders, seminar participant, keynote speaker, panellist, doctoral student, researcher, and audience member. One way we experimented with these positions was to consciously assign and reassign roles. We chose to ask doctoral students, senior lecturers,

and professors to sit together in a panel or to participate as audience. In seminar V, all participants, regardless of academic rank, got to perform a well-known theorist character on stage. An additional way in which we seminar leaders chose to regulate roles was to *democratically distribute speaking opportunities*. As described earlier, this was done by collecting questions on sticky notes, summarising them thematically and then directing them to the speaker and the panel. It was also done by giving the floor to doctoral students first and to senior researchers later. In retrospect, however, we see that our choice to assign a senior researcher to make a short introductory lecture beginning each seminar to some extent counteracted our intention of creating a space for equitable discussions. In the written doctoral student reflections, some suggested that they too be trusted to make such introductions and thus contribute to the framing of the seminar.

Another important aspect of orchestrating the seminars was to make use of the physical space as a resource for learning (Selander, 2008). Here, we paid particular attention to exploring the levels of the room and the shapes that bodies formed together through participants' placement. We also considered social aspects of space with an ambition to enable more equitable and democratic conversations. We saw, for example, that *the flat, non-hierarchical panel form* offered doctoral students a more equal position when they were placed side by side with researchers on stage and everyone was orientated towards a shared interest. Based on the student performance and audience interaction we observed, this kind of social staging provided an opportunity for the doctoral student panellists to position themselves as researchers. It did not, however, provide a new resource for students who were not on the panel. Correspondingly, *the circle form*, staged during the evaluation at the end of seminars I and II, offered a communicative situation where eyes were directed towards each other so that everyone could be seen and heard. Even so, the circle form did not automatically result in a more equitable conversation. A doctoral student expressed this in the following way:

The democratic format in the second part of the seminar, that is to say that the audience sat in a circle, made no major difference to the discussion climate. To a large extent, a positioning was still taking place where some strong voices dominated and this almost became even more evident now that we could all look at each other, as opposed to when everyone is sitting in rows in a more traditional form of discussion after a panel presentation.

While we here sought to frame the physical space as a democratic setting through placement of chairs, the doctoral student's reflection above shows that the circle form did not offer sufficient support for all participants to position themselves in the seminar. On the contrary, the circular shape became counterproductive as it enabled gazes reinforcing existing hierarchies. Sitting in a circle thus functioned as a pan-optic (Foucault, 1977), hence disciplining, arrangement. Based on Levine's (2015)

argument that different forms can conflict with each other, we conclude that in the context of our doctoral seminar, the circular form—which we the researchers associated with educational equity as practiced in for example study circles—clashed with the triangular form of academic hierarchy. As seen in previous research, doctoral students might opt out of speaking as they do not find themselves in a sufficiently stable position in their field to be able to challenge those who are already established (Leonard & Becker, 2009; Peixoto, 2014). Also, given the relatively large total number of people present in the first three seminars (up to 37 people), the doctoral students' limited scope for action in the circle can be understood in terms of risk-taking.

Another way we used the physical room for staging a learning situation was to offer participants to place themselves on a level above the others in the room. Occupying a high-level place from which to speak is something that has been granted to few, such as royalty and priests (or, in a less extreme form, lecturers or keynote speakers at a podium). A photo from seminar V shows three improvising students taking a seat on a balcony near the ceiling, several metres above us seminar leaders and other participants who were placed below, looking up. The physical experience of students taking a place in the room which was not only equal but in fact superior to senior participants, created a shift in power and a reversed hierarchy, resisting the more traditional form characterising doctoral seminars, where implicit codes of conduct govern who is allowed to speak and how (Schnaas, 2016). Documentation photos from the seminar show that even doctoral students who usually did not physically or verbally take up much space in the group acted with assertive body language up on the balcony. In line with other situations where distance between speaker/singer and audience is greater than usual, for example for a priest in a church or an actor on stage, the doctoral students on the balcony above us had to speak louder and gesture more vigorously, thus forced to claim more space both acoustically and spatially.

Working with movement and dynamics

To design something also means putting something in motion. To explore movement and dynamics, we alternated between smaller groups offering a greater sense of security, and larger groups offering a plurality of voices and greater collective intensity. In addition, alternating between different locations and levels in a room invited movement and variation in concrete and bodily ways, as opposed to habitual sedentary academic subjects seated in front of the computer or around a seminar table—the latter often in congealed form where fixed seats reflect status. In our sessions, participants were often encouraged to move around, rearrange the furnishing, approach the writing board, and so on, in other words, to use all resources the room offered in order to vary conditions for meaning-making. Movement and role changes demonstrated the ways in which physical and social space interacted with each other, changing the rhythm of the seminar (Levine, 2015). After performing a fictional conversation between well-known theorists at seminar V, a doctoral student wrote:

The energy was there all day. The very thing of being “on stage” for a while generates new energy. Maybe a good strategy for other occasions as well? To exchange seats and play the leading role for a short moment if you present a comment or a text, for example.

We also alternated between different university buildings to see how their location, architecture, and interior design would affect social relations in the room. Seminar II was, for example, held in a more traditional lecture hall with fixed chairs and folding tables in terrace form. We clearly observed how the room invited the audience to just sit quietly and listen, rather than to interact with others as they did during other sessions with more flexible furnishings. To a certain extent, this inflexibility was compensated by the setup of writing questions on sticky notes, which created movement.

Our pursuit of dynamics furthermore resulted in designing the seminars so that different perspectives and understandings could contrast and cause friction. The reason for this was partly to further complex understandings of the object of knowledge, partly to train the doctoral students to handle disagreements as a fundamental part of academia. Our choice of panellists was for example made to include a plurality of perspectives, and we explicitly encouraged dynamics to enable creative discussions. Similarly, when working with texts we selected articles to include contrasting perspectives. Despite these ambitions, conversations did on several occasions end up in a comfortable sense of agreement. In such situations, we the seminar leaders consciously raised questions intended to disrupt consensus. Acknowledging that disagreements might entail a risk of doctoral students feeling exposed, we observed that the use of sticky notes partly reduced that risk by shifting focus from individual participants to the artifacts of the sticky notes and to the object of knowledge being discussed.

Working with spatial arrangements of content

To create mobility and flow, not only in terms of physical positions but also in terms of ideas, we worked with thematisation and other methods offering opportunities to arrange issues spatially, rather than by sequential text only. One example is the thematical arrangement of sticky notes through which the audience submitted questions in seminars I–III. This form enabled covering a variety of questions in a short time. More participants could contribute with questions compared to if asked one by one in spoken form, and the same participant could submit several sticky notes without dominating sonic space. Instead of a seminar logic where only a few voices were heard, everyone’s questions could be treated as part of thematic clusters. The removable and reusable sticky notes allowed a speedy thematisation. The following student reflection following seminar I illustrates how the sticky notes functioned as a resource for a democratic form of meaning-making:

I think the concept of sticky notes and thematisation was ingenious—it partly meant that the audience participants who [usually enjoy rank/privilege/precedence etc.] due to their academic position, ethnicity and/or biological gender were granted less space when reduced to one voice among others. This can potentially also result in more open and generally directed answers from panellists. Which in turn can enable answers to be less governed by the above-mentioned system of rank/gender/ethnicity.

In addition, the fact that the notes were anonymous offered an opportunity to submit bolder questions. In seminar IV, the doctoral students participated in arranging thematic clusters with sticky notes. This ability of taking a meta-perspective to analyse arguments is perhaps one of the most important ones that a doctoral student needs to develop during their education.

The portable feature of sticky notes also offered the opportunity to create *mind maps* where participants could *map out and negotiate* different *meanings* of a concept, and the *relationships* between these meanings – which ones were closer or farther from each other – and how they related to different theoretical lines of thought. In seminar IV, where we employed this kind of exercise, we saw negotiations unfold in a kind of convergent/divergent oscillation in which a concept or a keyword could be distributed in its manifold possible meanings in one moment, to be defined and categorised in the next. While negotiations in a traditional seminar generally require verbally challenging others, the sticky notes enabled other forms of negotiation. For example, a student could silently approach the whiteboard and simply move one or more sticky notes to another location in the mind map.

Working with figuration and improvisation

In several of the seminar sessions, we chose to work with *figuration*, i.e., fashioning or shaping a figure in the sense of “a person, thing, or action representative of another.”¹ These seminars were designed to open for creative improvisation, but also to break with the frequently strong focus on written texts. Figuration was most clearly explored at seminar V, where participants performed imagined conversations between different well-known scholars after a short time of preparation. As on several previous occasions, we used a room with an open space, flexible furniture, and spiral stairs up to a balcony. The features of this room were significant for the seminar design, as it offered certain spatial opportunities.

Improvisation as a form offers the opportunity to *challenge ingrained safety*, and this figuration-centred seminar was the one most evidently to open to the unexpected. Not only were the participants to play a theorist role character, but also to

1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/figure>. In similarity to the German concept of *Gestaltung*, often used in the Arts.

perform a form of knowledge by imagining what that theorist would say and do in the flesh. What exactly will happen during an improvisation is difficult to predict, requiring a strong presence and ability to make quick choices. As improvisation entails a significant risk of blurting out something ill-considered in the heat of the moment, it might produce feelings of being exposed and vulnerable. It was to our surprise that everyone accepted the challenge of giving life to an article by assuming a role and speaking with the author's voice. We found that a small group can be advantageous in exercises placing participants outside their comfort zone. A doctoral student wrote after the seminar: "It was nice that the group was small, I think that part of today's sense of ease and the conversations that happened were due to the fact that we were not so many."

Paradoxically, however, *speaking with someone else's voice* also proved to *create security* by offering distance to one's own position. In a more traditional seminar form, participants would usually be expected to present knowledge in the following manner: "In this text, Author X argues that.... What a doctoral student utters during the seminar thus forms a kind of declarative self-presentation which, during the course of the doctoral program, accumulates into some sort of performance capital. Figuration instead offers an opportunity to step aside from expectations and hierarchies associated with one's own position, if only for a moment. In such embodied exercises, the role of someone else is temporarily taken on, hence it is not "I" who utters something. The imagined characters can be allowed to get angry, lose an argument, or making a fool of themselves, resulting in conversations less declarative and more explorative. A doctoral student wrote afterwards:

The method of letting us take the positions of the authors of the various texts in dialogues was easy and relaxed, but at the same time demanded great depth as one had to try to understand the texts on all possible levels, as if one had written them oneself. It was liberating to be able to free myself from my own position, it helped me to gain new perspectives.

This session was the one where the participants most evidently showed new sides of themselves. One of the doctoral students said that he after the exercise felt freer to express himself, without necessarily sounding intelligent. Another doctoral student stated that the exercise inspired him to start using creative methods in teaching undergraduate students, but he also pointed out some weaknesses with the exercise:

I did not get as much out of this as I hoped. This was probably largely because we participants interpreted the instructions in such different ways. [...] This made it difficult to let the texts speak to each other. We had to spend a lot of time trying to find out to what extent the texts dealt with the same thing at all, and what that meant for which positions we could take as their authors. This made it difficult to have an interesting debate between the participants.

Trying to take a certain author's position *physically* offered *involvement* and *intensity*, and some of the doctoral students commented that the participants in their group forgot most of what had been decided during preparation when performing in front of the rest of the class. The performance led to a shift in focus for meaning-making, especially considering bodily acts—how would, for example, Foucault sit and what would he wear? The exercise also generated other questions, such as “what would Foucault have researched if he were alive today?” We afterwards concluded that in this particular seminar, preparation and performance became two separate processes, and that the intended focus on theoretical concepts was maintained primarily during preparation.

Working with playfulness, creativity, imagination

In the redesign we strived for *playfulness* and *creativity* to facilitate situations where doctoral students may feel tense due to performance-related pressure. We also provided physical resources for playful purpose, such as the props in seminar V, something which may be considered unusual in doctoral education. Several of the quotes provided so far show that formation-centred exercises appeared to make the seminar “easier,” something we interpret both in terms of workload and mood. We worked with *imagination* by trying to open to the idea “what if ...?” for example in designing the exercises with imagined conversations between theorists and negotiation of mind maps with sticky notes, which we have described earlier. We also worked with “imaginary projects;” in seminar IV, we discussed an imaginary anthology, resulting in a table of contents with chapter headings. A doctoral student wrote:

Thinking of the seminar as planning an anthology was an interesting move. It gave me the opportunity to try to think like a researcher in some way. I mean thinking about how the things you read and work with can become a text resource that is part of a conversation and can help others think and answer, rather than something that should be reproduced in a text that shows that you have read what you were supposed to. It was also interesting to think about the mind map exercise as a model for how to start a book / article / research project.

For this student, the seminar design seemed to offer training in independent thinking, but also a form of identification training for the research role—a kind of skills training forming the backdrop to the entire redesign attempt. However, even when we tried new forms of seminars, it turned out to be easy to slip into more familiar behaviour. Another doctoral student wrote about the same seminar:

During the second part of the seminar, I perceived that not everyone understood that the conversation had an exploratory character and thus wanted to convince the others of the true meaning of the concept, which partly ruined the conversation's possibilities. I consequently see that an introduction to the seminar's open and exploratory form needs to be grounded in all participants.

Here we were reminded of the importance of giving clear instructions, so that even playful and creative projects can take place with a sufficiently shared focus. In seminar VI, where a professional sound engineer helped us to record the debate for an imaginary podcast, we sensed that the recording did something to our conversation. It created an air of strong presence—the fact that our conversation could be posted online and heard by outsiders meant that more was at stake. It was important to avoid overlapping speech and to sharpen one's arguments. Consequently, this became our perhaps most democratic conversation; the rhythmic form changed as our attention turned to the microphone and no one interrupted anyone else—something we had not anticipated. Addressing not only an internal research group but also an imaginary external audience furthermore seemed to generate envisioning future potential situations. One doctoral student wrote:

I think I learned about the current state of research during this seminar and its preparations. This allowed me to see myself as a future expert in my field, as a person who might be called up by a journalist as a general expert in my field. Perhaps this happened in synergy with me practicing to speak as an expert, speaking with the author's voice. Even though I did not fully take on that role, I felt that I could argue efficiently based on my text and defend its premises and conclusions.

Concluding reflections

Taking a design theoretic approach to learning (Kress, 2010), new insights into the seminar practice of doctoral education are enabled. To redesign the doctoral seminar form means to create something new within an institutional framing characterised by rather strong regulations (Walker et al., 2009). In our case, this redesign has primarily focused on widening the possibilities to occupy plural positions in the physical space as an identification training for the research role. We have experimented with modalities and resources containing bodily, affective, and creative qualities which on the one hand are central to research, but on the other hand usually do not fit well into the academic space (Walker et al., 2009). Viewing learning as a process of enhancing one's capacity for acting in the world (Kress, 2010), we have chosen to highlight certain examples from our data in the results, illustrating the staging of doctoral seminars. The use of the physical space and various other resources show potential to open opportunities for doctoral students to imagine themselves as researchers, which is crucial for the formation of a researcher identity (Walker et al., 2009; Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). However, we conclude that it is easy to fall back into an ingrained order in terms of positions of power. In addition, exploratory working methods turned out to require clearer instructions than we had expected.

Based on the assumption that different forms and resources offer different possibilities and limitations (Kress, 2010; Levine, 2015), we have experimented with various forms in the social space that doctoral seminars constitute. Here, too, we were surprised. The circular shape, intended to contribute to a more democratic conversation, proved to have the power to reinforce hierarchical positioning through the disciplining function of gaze. Compared to the circle, a traditional auditorium arrangement offered better opportunities to express oneself with less risk of being examined. The placement of doctoral students in spatial positions—for example in a flat-shaped panel side by side with senior lecturers and professors, or in an elevated location in the room—provided space for authority and increased room for action. Some resources also proved to be efficient in breaking up established hierarchical forms and creating new conditions for communication in the social space by redirecting attention. The use of props (costumes, etc.) as a new resource in one seminar, for example, contributed to an increased focus on the bodies in the room. Similarly, removable sticky notes shifted focus towards knowledge objects by separating questions and concepts from those who wrote them. Recording equipment helped to sharpen the conversational focus as participants avoided interrupting each other and instead waited their turn. All these resources helped to communicate several different types of meaning affecting form; arrangements that increased mobility in the physical room or required a different order of speech than usual, for example, not only affected the seminar's hierarchical form but also its rhythmic form (see Levine, 2015).

Yet another surprise was the fact that dramatisation of content can contribute to downplaying performance-related tension. It is hardly reasonable to believe that hierarchies in a seminar group (based on academic rank, social competence, etc.) could be eradicated completely. However, we saw that the use of creative and improvisational exercises to some extent unsettled these hierarchies. We had expected the more socially confident doctoral students to take over the leadership role and seize the opportunity to speak when given more space. But in role-play exercises, as it turned out, even students who had previously acted in low-key and/or insecure ways displayed more extrovert and confident expressions and took up more physical and social space.

To work in this way with the two parallel tracks of teaching and research has been challenging and exciting, but also fraught with great difficulties. Strongly aware of the imminent risk of normative assumptions in our analysis—due to our commitment to the doctoral students, our desire to work in a more creative way, but also due to our own past experiences as doctoral students—we have consistently asked critical questions about the results of our analysis. In addition to the detailed description of seminar design we have given, we view this self-critical approach as fundamental to the study's credibility.

Overall, we conclude that utilising different types of resources and modalities and experimenting with seminar forms can be a way to recognise, articulate and

arrange for *learning* in doctoral education (Bastalich, 2017), furthering the socialisation process of developing a researcher identity required for doctorateness (Smith, 2022; Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). As described by Green (2009, p. 245) the seminar choreography is an “act of imagination that is required in doctoral work, intermingled with fantasy and desire.” But, as shown by earlier research, doctoral students may find it difficult to decode and live up to the informal norms and rules characterising academia, and the risk of being reprimanded might result in reluctance to speak at seminars (Leonard & Becker, 2009; Peixoto, 2014). One implication of our study is that consciously redesigning doctoral seminars show potential to provide opportunities for socialisation and playful ways to finding and developing one’s voice (Barnett & Coate, 2005). To design a socially open seminar space offers alternative ways of staging one’s research position and engaging as a prospective researcher, thus enhancing the capacity for acting in the academic world.

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