The paper deals with the daily routines of students at school. As you know there is famous ethnographic work on students’ sub-cultures at school (cf. Willis 1977, Woods 1980, Zinnecker 1978). The peer culture of students is described as complex scholastic counter-worlds with their own rules, including various ways of distancing themselves from scholastic requirements up to the point of questioning school itself. But the question still remains, the studies and findings mentioned notwithstanding, how do pupils deal with the day-to-day aspects of school, aside from giving weary assessments in interviews or getting into trouble in more or less spectacular ways? How are, beyond the “point” and the “pointlessness” of the class, the practical requirements of the classroom situation present in the pupils’ behaviour? How do pupils take part in establishing and maintaining lessons (cf. Hammersley & Turner 1980)? What does “doing pupil” mean for children and youths (cf. Lahelma & Gordon 1997)?

In the everyday nature of “doing pupil” we encounter the methodological limit of studies using surveys or interviews. The practices that shape a pupil are too deeply rooted and too implicit to be recognized by the participants themselves. They may, however, be recognized by the observer (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson 1995).

1. The Research Project

The analysis I want to present derives from a research project “youth culture within the classroom” (“Jugendkultur in der Unterrichtssituation”) which was financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). We conducted participant observations at two highly contrasting schools: a high school with a curriculum including Latin and Greek and a progressive comprehensive school. The researcher observed two to three classes and the included breaks two to three times a week. These observations were possible at any time and were not previously arranged. They included different subjects and teachers and focussed on different pupils. A recording device, a small MD recorder, was used to record what was said while the observations were made. At first the microphone was attached to the clothes of the ethnographer. Later the microphone was attached to the students’ own clothes or placed on the desk in front of the students. This made it possible not only to see that the pupils were whispering, but also to hear what was being said. These recordings, with the comments and
reactions of the student and his or her neighbour, opened new worlds for the research. It became possible to analyse the microcosms that existed within the classroom, which had been seen as a seemingly coherent classroom situation. The field notes were composed directly after the field work was done using the initial notes taken as well as from memory. Excerpts of the audio recordings were transcribed and integrated into these field notes.

Our study focussed on the 3rd to 5th year of high school, which is a crucial period in the formation of a pupil’s attitude toward school and its demands. From a pedagogical point of view, this is considered the most difficult age. The adolescent phase is the time when pupils “distance” themselves from school to the greatest extent. At the same time, it seems that pupils develop a particular demeanour toward school that deepens and hardens into the school-job mentality. One does what has to be done without (fully) identifying with it. One does the tasks that are set without questioning their meaning or legitimacy. Routine and pragmatism become the central aspect of the pupils’ everyday life at school.

2. Observations from Group Lessons

The ethnographer does not observe learning and he does not observe didactics and the intentions of teachers either. But what is the topic of the observation and how is it to be described? Especially when focussing on the pupils’ activities – when removing the gaze from the teachers actions – the diversity and the fragmentary form of lessons become very evident. The lesson seems to dissolve into parallel, coexisting worlds within the classroom, which only occasionally touch and synchronize. This poses the question of what school lessons constitute in a new way. What is it that makes up a school lesson? This is the very simple question which is posed to the observer and the participants as well.

In the observation of the daily routines of school lessons the impression suggests itself, that at least a part of the question of what lessons are about is answered by the products of school lessons. This is what I want to show today: The analysis of pupils’ activities in different forms of lessons points to an abstract but drastic orientation towards products. It seems that school lessons mainly result in notes, in filled in worksheets, in posters and in other products which can be carried out, finished, checked and controlled.

I shall first give you an example from the observation of a group lesson. It takes place in the 7th grade at a Gymnasium (13-year olds at a Grammar School) in the Latin lesson of a young teacher who prefers to use the method of group work from time to time. She gives the students a plan for the whole week (‘‘Wochenplan’’) which is to be carried out in groups. The
idea, of course, is that of cooperative learning. But let us take a look at some extracts from our field notes:

\[
\text{Uta starts reading aloud the jobs listed on the plan and then makes suggestions as to how to start working. Hanna as well reads the plan and decides: “We take one sheet of paper for notes and one for the results.” Uta takes a sheet of paper and a pencil. “What do I have to do?” asks Steffi. Hanna and Uta simultaneously say: “Nothing.” But then they find a job for Steffi: “You do the i-conjugation”. Steffi accepts this job. Hanna now has the book in front of her and dictates sentences which summarize the text for Uta to write. (The task noted on the plan is to summarize the text.) Steffi meanwhile talks to herself: “Great! I’ve got it” and she leafs through her book. (Hedda Bennewitz)}\]

The first job-oriented activities aim at the organisation of the working material and at the division of labour. Hanna ignores Uta’s attempts to negotiate the common handling of the job and instead just creates realities by starting in a certain manner. Uta takes the role of the “writer” and that the complementary role of “dictating” can only go to Hanna goes without saying, because among these three students Hanna is the highest achiever. At first Steffi doesn’t get a job of her own – only by providing her with an additional job from the ‘Wochenplan’ she is somehow integrated into the team again. So this stage of organizing the work ends up with establishing a very rigid division of labour: Hanna dictates, Uta writes and Steffi independently works on another task. Hanna’s monopoly as far as the content of the work of this group is concerned is now expressed in her sole possession of the book.

Decisions on questions of organizing the work and the division of labour mostly - as in our example – do not require extensive negotiations and often are not even explicated. The distribution of jobs and the taking on of working roles relies on a deeply rooted knowledge the students have about one another. The members of a school class know each other very well and they especially know who best fits to certain jobs within a given group. One knows to whom the leadership belongs, one knows who has the prettiest hand-writing and so on.

The common aim is to organize the work in a way that it can be done as effective and economic as possible. Our observations point to a pattern, where groups of students tend to install a couple - a working couple - in the middle of the group and to place the other members of the group around them. The “working couple” differentiates functionally in work on the content and writing and builds the productive and product-oriented core of the group. The aim of the work is seen in the fabrication of the product which is to be the result of their
work and which they commonly have to take responsibility for. The observable practices of
the pupils aim at the most effective and economic production of the demanded results.

Some time later, in the observed group work, Hanna shows the somewhat frustrated
Steffi the progress of the work: “Look, we have written that much!” (three quarters of
a page)

Hanna (ap)proves the style of working in the group as effective. Steffi is included in
reviewing the state of the “common” work. She has to recognize the productivity of this way
of handling the job which goes hand in hand with her almost complete exclusion from the
common work.

To give you a better idea how this group dynamic functions, I would like to show you some
video stills from another group work where you can observe the delegation of work to one
group member just from the relative position of the bodies to one another. FOTOS: You see
the student taking initiative and in a very short amount of time the work is delegated to him.
This female student takes the job of the writer.

3. Observations from Lecturing or “Frontal Teaching”
I have tried to give you an impression of the strong orientation towards productivity and
pragmatics within group work. Now I want to turn to another example which involves frontal
teaching. Lessons with lecturing may, at the first gaze, look less orientated towards
production processes. Here the dominating activities for students seem to be listening,
answering and asking questions as well as giving or following a presentation. But the frontal
teaching lesson reveals its implicit orientation towards production processes as well when the
observation focuses on the activities of individual students. Here the ethnographer becomes
attentive to the markers which structure and centralize the diverse ongoing activities and
side-activities. These “markers” consist in the teacher’s order to copy down the notes from the
blackboard or in the teacher’s dictate of the important results for the students to write down in
their notebooks. It is at this moment that the students interrupt their current activities, adjust
their gaze to the front and synchronize themselves in writing.
In some lessons you can watch pupils so busy whispering to one other and writing hidden
notes that you cannot imagine that they catch anything from the lesson taking place at the
front of the classroom. – Let me show you a few more stills to make clear what I mean.
FOTOS – Even though they are very involved in their other activities, simultaneously they are
able to get the notes from the blackboard into their notebooks. Perhaps the frontal teaching
lesson is to be understood as the production of notes on the blackboard which result in notes in the notebooks? The participants, teachers and students, seem to agree that it is a sufficient “result” of the lesson. The ‘working consensus’ (cf. Goffman) of frontal teaching lessons seems to go like this: As long as some students try to answer the teacher’s questions, as long as the others aren’t too noisy and as long as all of the pupils get the notes from the blackboard into their notebooks, everybody is free to do what he or she likes.

I will show you an example which is a short extract from field notes describing a pupils’ lecture on buildings in Ancient Rome. This represents the daily routine in the 8th grade of a Gymnasium (Grammar School):

*The teacher now asks Christoph and Paul to “summarize” for the others to write down. Christoph has to put the title on the blackboard: “Kolosseum”. The teacher: “Okay, c or k doesn’t matter, important is one l and double ss”. Then Christoph dictates and everybody writes down:

“Built 80 AD
48 m high, 148 m long, 156 m wide
45 000 – 60 000 seats.”

The teacher: “And what was it used for?”

Christoph gives the key words: “fights of Gladiators, animal fights, execution of Christians” – “what?” – “Execution of Christians” (is taken down in the notes).*

The field notes show how the students’ lecture and the activities of the teacher are directed to the utilization in the form of keywords. The oral lecture is nearly without relevance, because everybody knows, at the end a “summary” in keywords to write down will be provided.

The notes on the blackboard are the place where lessons, teacher’s talk as well as student’s contributions ‘materialize’. On the blackboard is what shall remain from the lesson (as far as it is written down). Large parts of the lesson seem to be the supply industry for the production of the notes on the blackboard. What is produced on the blackboard is what eventually has to be reproduced as well: This is the knowledge which normally has to be learnt for examinations. In light of this overwhelming relevance of the blackboard, it is not very surprising that some routines of the pupils’ job aim at the reproduction of the blackboard in their notebooks. At the same time these routines have their part in generating the relevance of
the blackboard: Not least the routines of the pupils’ job focus the lesson to the notes on the blackboard.

What lies behind this radical orientation of school lessons towards production that the observation of pupils’ activities reveals? Is there a motif for the cooperation of the participants (teachers and students) in installing an everlasting process of production in the core of school lessons?

In my ethnographic investigation of the pupils’ job (cf. Breidenstein 2006, Breidenstein/Jergus 2008) I suppose that it is the precarious and delicate character of learning itself which brings the participants to transfer processes of learning into processes of production. While “learning” remains invisible and uncertain, the *products* of school activities are concrete and without doubt. Everybody can see that something *has been done*. Products document that the task has been performed and that some stuff has been dealt with. So the suspicion arises that it is the products of school lessons which guarantee that school makes sense. – If nothing else, at the end of the year the notebooks are filled.

4. Conclusions

What can Didactics learn from these ethnographic observations? It should be clear that there is no simple advice or prescription which arises from the ethnography of the pupils’ job. First of all this analysis takes up a very different point of view: While Didactics looks for the intentions of school lessons, for its goals and possibilities, the ethnography of schooling shows quite plainly the everyday routines and the practical handling of school lessons by the participants. This is the point for Didactics: it has to take these routines and practices of everyday behaviour in school lessons into account and I think it especially has to take the routines of the pupils’ job into account. As I have shown we have observed a handling of school lessons which is very much due to pragmatics and efficiency in the 7th and 8th grade (13 to 15-year olds). Students have become “professionals”, who go about their jobs with mastery and skill. Their attitude to school is somehow distanced but it is mainly formed by unquestioned routines: One goes to school and *does* his or her job, at the same time, it is not more than a *job*. Keeping this in mind it doesn’t seem very promising to conceptualize school lessons only from the perspective of motivation and interests.

Ethnography does point to the high relevance of routines and practical accomplishments which function independently of the actors’ intentions – in this respect it points to the
constraints of Didactics. And, to close this thought, I suppose Didactics is well advised to reflect on its own limitations.

References


