

Between power and powerlessness: teaching as ethically based aid in learning

Autor: Dariusz Stepkowski

Abstract

Mezi mocí a bezmocí: učení jako eticky založená pomoc při učení se. – Tento článek se zabývá vztahem mezi učitelskými a studentskými aktivitami. Teoretickým základem pro analýzu je koncepce německého filosofa výchovy Klause Prangeho. Dnes, jako možná nikdy předtím, je nejvíce pozornosti věnováno mezím pedagogického vlivu. Chtěl bych zde předvést koncepci, která umísťuje pedagogickou aktivitu mezi moc a bezmoc spolu se zdůrazněním pomoci žákům s jejich individuálním učením.

Článek je složen ze tří částí. V první části předvádím dvě populární interpretace vztahu mezi učením a učení se. Obě tyto interpretace téměř úplně ignorují moc obsaženou ve výukovém obsahu. Druhá část prezentuje přehled operativní pedagogiky (v němčině Operative Pädagogik) rozvinuté výše již zmíněným Prangem. Třetí a poslední část rozebírá „morálku ukazování“ (německy Moral des Zeigens) rozvinutou tímto německým pedagogem. Z pohledu této morálky ukazování je učení zabarveno dalším významem: stává se povoláním ve smyslu eticky založené pomoci při učení jako nezávislé aktivity učícího se.

Keywords: teaching, learning, showing, power, powerlessness**Klíčová slova:** učení, učení se, ukazování, moc, bezmocnost**Preliminary considerations**

Contemporary literature devotes considerable attention to the issue of the potential (power) and limits (powerlessness) of pedagogical activity. One may therefore be surprised to find that authors who discuss the subject do not draw a clear distinction between educating and teaching; sometimes they even treat these two distinct categories as one. Thus, authors who are doubtful about the purposefulness of education sometimes also question teaching potential; or, on the other hand, they may be thoroughly convinced of the effectiveness of certain educational influence (at least their own influence), teaching should be equally effective. As a contemporary Irish pedagogue proposes, “emancipation of teaching” is necessary. (Hogen 2010: 11)

In my search for an appropriate manner in which to present my understanding of the purposefulness, potential (power), and limits (powerlessness) of educating (as opposed to teaching), I wish to refer to the musings of a contemporary German pedagogue, Klaus Prange. For the past two decades, Prange’s publications have not only stood in defence of the identity of teaching, but also proposed an interesting thought model that is worth explaining. The model is based on the deeply rooted distinction in pedagogical tradition between education and teaching. Education, in simple terms, is the direct relationship between an educator and an educatee, with teaching being characterised by “a third element” (J. F. Herbart) that

constitutes the relationship between a teacher and a learner. This third element is the subject of teaching; in other words, the teaching content. (Benner 2012: 231–248)

It follows from such a distinction that within education, a teacher's activity (teaching) and a learner's activity (learning) are not directed at one another, but rather at the teaching content, which, to put it in modern language terms, functions as a mediator between the two parties. The model of a didactic triangle naturally comes to mind, with the teacher, the teaching content, and the learner in its vertices. (Prange 2005: 55) With this model in mind, I wish to ask: firstly, what kind of power does teaching content give to a teacher, and secondly, what ethical obligation, if any, does the same content impose on the learner?

This article comprises three parts. In the first part, I present two popular interpretations of the relationship between teaching and learning. Both interpretations almost completely ignore the power contained in teaching content. The second part presents an overview of operative pedagogy (German, Operative Pädagogik) developed by the aforementioned Prange. The third and final part discusses the morality of showing (German, Moral des Zeigens) by the same German pedagogue. In view of the morality of showing, teaching is imbued with another meaning: teaching becomes a vocational ethics-based aid in learning as an independent activity of the learner.

Forgotten teaching

Authors who currently discuss didactics, both theoretical and practical, hold one of two outlooks, i.e., radical constructivism or paidocentrism, and prove in opposing fashions that teaching content does not play an important role in teaching and learning. Both theories accentuate the learner's activity but interpret it completely differently.

Radical constructivists operate on the assumption that learners create their constructs in a completely independent manner, i.e., regardless of any external influence. (Spitzer 2012: 29–96) From such a perspective, learning is an autopoietic process that cannot be controlled or directed by pedagogically active persons, in this case, teachers. Radical constructivism defines experience as constructs created by the brain. The brain looks for connections between these constructs. Depending on the efficiency, or lack thereof, of this search for connections, we may distinguish connectable and unconnectable constructs. The function of connectable constructs is to enter relationships with other constructs, while unconnectable constructs irritate the learner. The occurrence of irritation signals a lack of the aforementioned connectivity function and motivates the brain to repeat its constructive effort. (Spitzer 2012: 121–131)

Trying to find a didactic concept or theory that would follow the assumptions of radical constructivism to the fullest is most likely futile; and even if such a concept or theory was to be created, then any teacher following it would, without doubt, face failure. This is because radical constructivism views learning as the processing of negative experiences caused by a lack of connectivity between neuronal structures. With only a single pedagogical activity (teaching) available, a teacher is unable to help a learner overcome such difficulties. Radical constructivism puts teachers at a disadvantage and shows the complete powerlessness with respect to learning, as defined in such a manner.

The aforementioned constructivist approach, in a vastly less radical form, is influencing modern education, especially the understanding of the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Many teaching theoreticians demand that the paradigm of school operation be changed. They propose that we should construct knowledge rather than provide it in a pre-made form. Dorota Klus-Stańska (2002: 123) introduced two phrases that illustrate the issue well: “knowledge that follows a trail and knowledge that looks for a trail” (translated from Polish). The “new” teacher should display the ability to creatively construct knowledge together with the learner, not just to reconstruct and give it. For this reason, communication is the most important pedagogical competence. According to Klus-Stańska, the future of teaching and learning lies in dialogue education, which is required for “a different cognitive relationship between the teacher and the learner and between the learner and the cognitive reality to appear” (translated from Polish). (Klus-Stańska 2002: 402) A space we may refer to as “in-between” that encompasses didactic paidocentrism determines the new type of relationship.

The paidocentric approach stems from theories by Lew S. Wygotski and Jerome Bruner. These theories consider the sociocultural environment to be the main determinant of learning. Learning is a social process through which one acquires cultural tools, especially the language. We may say that learning allows one to build scaffolding that mediates between the teacher and the learner and between the learner and reality. The activities of both teachers and learners are manifested in a space called the sphere of immediate development. (Filipiak 2008: 21)

We may image this sphere as the common area between two circles, with one circle marking the scope of the learner’s activity (learning) and the other marking the scope of the teacher’s activity (teaching). It is in this space that teachers and learners exchange their contributions. The learner’s contribution comprises silent knowledge and everyday competences. The teacher’s contribution primarily comprises professional knowledge and regulating competence. (Filipiak 2008: 23–24) The goal of the sphere of immediate development is to develop the ability to learn in the learner. To explain the possibility of this development, I will use the cybernetic model presented recently by a Polish pedagogue, Bogusław Śliwerski.


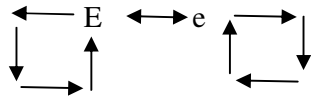
In his book entitled *Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Self-Education*, Śliwerski provides the following definition:

“Self-education is an intrasubjective phenomenon, a variable that mediates between the effect of a particular stimulus situation and the behaviour in response to that situation. I think (...), even though this is still just an assumption for me, that self-education is not a separate category of human behaviour or activity but, rather, a self-regulating dynamism that allows an individual to achieve increasingly more advanced stages of the structural and functional organisation of his or her personality.” (translated from Polish). (Śliwerski 2010: 205)

In the quoted definition Śliwerski refers to self-education. Even so, didactic paidocentrism treats learning in the exact same manner. The desired final effect of developing one’s learning ability is a state of independent self-education, i.e., education that does not

require external aid or intervention. Śliwerski's concept is worth explaining in more detail. Table 1 provides an overview of the concept.

Table 1. Types of educator's influence on the educatee according to personal development phases

	Development phase	Type of relationship between two systems	Illustration (E – educator, e – educatee)
1.	Anomie	Simple one-way connection	$E \longrightarrow e$
2.	Heteronomy	Simple connection that determines a self-adjoint connection in the second system	$E \longrightarrow e$ 
3.	Autonomy	Feedback between two self-adjoint systems	

Taken from: Śliwerski (2010: 163)

I will only comment on Table 1 with respect to the process that takes place between the educator (E) and the educatee (e). Śliwerski distinguished three phases in this process, according to nomenclature used in the field: anomie, heteronomy, and autonomy. During the first and second phases, the educator exerts a one-way influence (simple connection) that runs from him or her to the educatee. Heteronomy, on the other hand, differs from anomie in that the educatee experiences certain awareness of being under someone's influence. Śliwerski refers to this self-awareness as a self-adjoint connection, a term he borrowed from cybernetics. It then comes as no small surprise that the state of complete autonomy depends on the occurrence of the same self-adjoint connection in the educator. Does this mean that the educator has not participated in education in a self-aware manner up to this point? Regardless of the answer, the system, or the cybernetic space, becomes closed.

A few conclusions regarding teaching and learning can be drawn in light of the above concept. Firstly, teaching comes before learning; teaching is actually the primary phenomenon. Secondly, learning involves becoming self-aware. Self-awareness concerns both the learner and the teacher. Thirdly, teaching content plays no role in the awakening of self-awareness. Both the learner and the teacher owe the attainment of this state solely to their mutual efforts. In such a system, teaching content seems secondary or even completely unnecessary. This is reminiscent to some extent of solipsism within Fichte's concept of Ego. (Stepkowski 2010: 68–76) Individuals bring out their identities from within, just as a spider takes its web from its insides.

Overview of operative pedagogy

In search for a solution to the situation describe in the previous chapter, I wish to present an interesting didactic concept by Klaus Prange. In his book entitled *Die Zeigestruktur der Erziehung*, Prange explains that the act of showing demands special attention and a distinct status. He considers showing as an 'elementary operation' and as a foundation for all educational activities such as teaching, educating, and learning. (Prange 2005: 11) The specific character of showing manifests itself thanks to a "pedagogical difference" between

the learner's activities and the teacher's activities. This difference does not, in fact, involve teaching separating itself from learning or vice versa; rather, it involves emphasising the relationship between these two processes. Thus, "this difference should not mean anything other than, firstly, that learning and teaching are both given, and secondly, that the process of learning is different from the process of teaching" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 59)

Prange explains that the need to accept the pedagogical differences from the very beginning stems from the fact "that children learn (...): this is obvious in pedagogy (...). However, it cannot go unnoticed that (...) our capacity to control what they learn and what they do not learn is severely limited, as we [i.e., parents, educators, and teachers – D. S.] do not create learning; on the contrary, we are forced to always accept learning as given. Thus, which customs and habits children are going to internalise, what tendencies and preferences they are going to develop, what they are going to like or not, what they are going to become familiar with and interested in, what they are going to learn thanks to painstaking exercise and what they are not going to even try – all this takes place like a form of a miracle or a disaster" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 58)

Learning, therefore, is a "primary phenomenon that cannot be fully explained", a phenomenon that lies beyond the scope of intentional teaching. (Prange 2005: 59) Prange expresses this in a more suggestive manner in the following sentence: "In the pedagogical equation, learning is the unknown variable" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 89) Does this mean that learning and teaching are two completely different activities?

It seems obvious that learning should not be treated as a completely autarkic activity. Prange emphasises that accepting the assumption that actions taken by teachers affect learners is the necessary condition of teaching. Learning, however, does not involve only passive reception – it is also a form of the learner's own activity. Prange refers to this form of activity as spontaneity (German, Spontaneität), which involves learners opening themselves to stimuli coming from the outside, i.e., from teachers. In light of these considerations, the following statements can be made: "1. Learning is an axiom of education and education science. 2. Learning cannot be simply given to anyone. 3. Learning is invisible" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 87–88)

Prange explains the first statement thusly: "Learning is an anthropological constant, a particular legacy given to us by our own nature" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 88) The second statement indicates the individual character of learning: everyone has to learn on his or her own. The invisibility of learning as the second characteristic of the process means that learning takes place unseen to teachers and educators as well as the learners themselves. Prange concludes: "Learning is one thing, and teaching is something different. The task of the teacher is to introduce coordination between these two types of operation. Literally speaking, the teacher needs to make them compatible with each other and synchronise them" (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 93) This is where the aforementioned category of showing comes in.

Contrary to appearances, the operation of showing is a fairly complex activity. It involves us showing something immaterial that only exists within our minds. This 'something' is the content or the meaning that we combine with the action of showing. It

seems that only humans are capable of showing and only humans can be the addressees of such actions because they can interpret what is being shown.

Prange states that “the action of showing comprises two movements: the first one is directed towards a certain object and the second one is directed back towards the showing individual” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 65) However, showing by itself does not yet constitute learning. It “obtains an educational [i.e., teaching-related – D. S.] meaning through the fact that its addressees are required to already have certain skills, knowledge, and behaviours or to are being prepared to learn them”. (Prange 2005: 69) The German pedagogue warns us that we should not understand showing to operate through “cue stick physics” (Prange 2005: 71), i.e., to transfer the intended effect onto the billiard ball regardless of the ball’s will. On the contrary: for showing to be effective, learners have to be open to directions given by teachers and have to be ready to activate their learning abilities.

In the process of showing, teaching and learning are coordinated, combined, and bound by articulation. What does articulation involve? In Prange’s opinion, articulation comprises three types of activity: first, showing; second, learning; and third, an articulation space he refers to as spacetimes of articulation (German, *Zeiträume der Artikulation*). In this space, showing and learning merge; in other words, Herbart’s educational teaching (i.e., concurrent teaching, learning, and education) becomes reality. Prange draws an image of two cogwheels to explain this merging. The first cogwheel consists of the operations of showing (teaching and educating) undertaken by the teacher-educator in particular space and calendar time. The second cogwheel, which consists of the operations of learning that take place in modal time, depends directly on the learner’s will. In other words, learners’ responses (or lack thereof) to actions taken by teachers depend first and foremost on the learners themselves. As mentioned before, the teacher’s task is to harmoniously integrate both cogwheels, i.e., the operations of showing and learning. (Prange 2005: 118) What is left to explain is the function of the teaching content in the process.

Teaching content and the morality of showing

As presented in the previous chapter, articulation is the cooperation between the activities of the teacher and the learner. Prange refers to this cooperation as good form and adds that it is “good, meaning successful” (translated from Polish) (Prange 2005: 162) insofar as it follows three stipulations: first, the “stipulation of understandability” (German, *Gebot der Verständlichkeit*); second, the “stipulation of rationality” (German, *Gebot der Zumutbarkeit*); and third, “the stipulation to correlate the acquired knowledge with previous and as well as future knowledge” (translated from Polish). (Prange, Strobel-Eisele 2006: 24–25) The third stipulation is given by the German term *Anschlussfähigkeit*, which can be translated as conjunctivity. According to Prange, these three rules of articulation constitute the foundations of “the morality of showing” (German, *Moral des Zeigens*), (Prange, Strobel-Eisele 2006: 23) which he discusses in detail in one of his latest works, *Die Ethik der Pädagogik* (2010). Before I give a more thorough description of the three stipulations, I should mention Prange’s opinion on the specifics of pedagogical causality. It is crucially important for the subject at hand, i.e., teaching content.

To explain the relationship between the activities of the teacher and the learner, Prange refers to an early and undervalued work by Herbart entitled *The Aesthetic Revelation of the*

World as Education's Main Concern (German, *Über die ästhetische Darstellung der Welt als das Hauptgeschäft der Erziehung*) Prange states that in this ingenious essay, the father of traditional didactics was able to find an explanation for the coercion that accompanies the operations of showing. Contrary to appearances, this coercion should not be attributed solely to teachers; learners themselves have a much more important role to play in it, as such coercion depends strictly on the aesthetic assessment that the learner makes during learning. Learners and their activities, in this case, learning, are the objects of the assessment. (Stepkowski 2010: 35–57) Self-assessment corresponds to showing, which, according to the distinction used in this paper, comprises the activities of the teachers and the learners. Learners are able to perform self-assessment thanks to the reflective ability to see themselves. (Prange 2005: 156–162)

Prange explains this process, which only appears complicated, thusly: “It involves coercion tied to a good, i.e., successful, form that does not enforce any action, but instead encourages the acceptance (openness) of learners to what is shown them. It turns, learners are unable to resist acceptance without rejecting their own self” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 162) The normative character of showing comes from an obligation that forms in the learner under the influence of the teacher’s activity. Through this obligation, the learner undertakes appropriate action that, on the one hand, is a response to showing, and on the other, stems from what is shown, i.e., from teaching content. In this context, Prange refers to the following lines by the Latin poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horatio): *Est modus in rebus, sunt certi fines, / quo ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum.* (Prange 2005: 138) The German pedagogue focuses his attention on the phrase *modus in rebus*, which can be translated as “a means in all things”. Prange means that teaching content by itself comes with certain limits and obligations, which objectively obstruct the operations of showing.

Having explained the role of teaching content, let us return to the three aforementioned norms of teaching. They are correlated with three attributes of teaching content: *verständlich*, *zumutbar*, and *anschlussfähig*. This triad can be translated as understandable, rational, and conjunctive. Table 2 presents an overview of the attributes correlated with appropriate prohibitions and stipulations that, in Prange’s view, should be followed within “the morality of showing”. (Prange 2005: 144) Each of the prohibitions mentioned in the table should be understood to indicate the intransgressible limits of showing. In contrast, stipulations are obligations that must be followed in order for showing to fulfil its main task, i.e., for showing to constitute teaching, educating, and learning at the same time.

Table 2. Attributes of K. Prange’s morality of showing.

Attribute of showing	Moral directives	
	Prohibitions	Stipulations
understandability	indoctrination	truth
rationality	social modelling	respect

conjunctivity	manipulation	conjunctivity
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Source: Own design.

Showing should be understandable. Prange comments on this seemingly obvious directive thusly: “Whatever we show, we must show it in such a way that it is substantially correct, clear, and understandable. Therefore, anything that only gives an appearance of showing, i.e., constitutes a so-called signaller, is out of the question, as is anything that stems from the vanity of teachers that makes them create an air of their supposed unfathomable intellectual depth before the learners and usurp a position of authority reminiscent of prophets or gurus” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 146) The stipulation of understandability tasks the teacher with arranging showing “in such a way that [the learners] are not only able to internalise what is being shown, but also are able to show the same thing to others” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 146)

Prange comments further on the subject: “The understandability of showing includes factual correctness as well as the art of presentation and didactic imagination” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 146) This, in turn, directly contradicts indoctrination, which preys on understatements and half-truths. The stipulation to seek the truth stems from indoctrination.

Whatever we wish to show must be adjusted to the learner’s capabilities and level. This is what the attribute of rationality involves. “We are obligated to take into account that children, students, and course attendants already know something and do not yet know something else” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 146) The stipulation of respect means respecting the learner’s knowledge as well as lack of it. Any teacher who underestimates or overestimates the learner’s ability and understanding capacity contravenes this stipulation. An obvious prohibition in this context is the prohibition of social modelling, i.e., teaching the learners only based on social needs, while disregarding their individuality.

“Even when we show something understandable and adjusted to learners’ capabilities, we are still tempted to talk about something unnecessary or trivial, about something that, even though we ourselves may consider it relevant at the time, is of no use to the learners in the long-term” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 147) Conjunctivity, when defined in this manner, obligates the teacher to have the learner’s good in mind when choosing teaching content. “Our duty is to make sure that the learners benefit in the future from what we are giving them today as a task to learn. This challenge can only be met if the learners are able to gradually decide on their own what they learn or not, what book to read, what instrument to play, and whom to befriend” (translated from Polish). (Prange 2005: 147) Attempts to manipulate the learners are the opposite of this. According to Prange, manipulation should be strictly persecuted and eliminated from school education as well as family upbringing.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would once again like to quote the distinct pedagogue, J. F. Herbart, who wrote in his aforementioned essay:

“To encourage learners to find themselves by choosing good and rejecting evil – this alone constitutes character shaping. (...) It would be nonsensical for educators to create the force necessary to achieve it on their own and then to give it to the educatee. (...) Rather, teachers should consider starting and skilfully conducting the process as their main task.” (translated from Polish). (Herbart 2008: 15–16)

The task of skilfully conducting the self-improvement process refers to teaching in particular. This article has presented an overview of how to achieve this. Its purpose was to show that the self-improvement process put moral obligations that stem from teaching content on the teacher as well as the learner. Teaching content determines the space where the teacher and the learner meet and in which both parties not only find themselves, but also find their own freedom.

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(Dariusz Stepkowski, Ph.D., associate professor and head of the Department of the General Pedagogy in the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland. Research interests: philosophy of education/general pedagogy, high school teaching theory, moral education.)