

## Chapter 33

# Does the One Who Asks the Question Lead the Way?

**Max Liebscht**

*Zittau/Goerlitz University of Applied Sciences, Germany*

**Sebastian Wahren**

*Zittau/Goerlitz University of Applied Sciences, Germany*

### ABSTRACT

*Teachers often tend to give answers to questions their students have not asked yet due to curricular requirements. In reflecting this practice, an experiment is documented where adult students were faced with enormously difficult questions. Their previous careers and education provided them with little experience in answering these questions. The vocational school where they were trained showed little commitment in assisting them. The outcome of the experiment was astonishing: the extremely complex tasks were excellently solved by all students. The findings might be interpreted in the light of the teacher's didactic gifts. Yet another explanation seems to be worth investigating. This chapter focuses on empathy and other impacts on learning success which have different effects in different contexts of relationship. Charisma, too, is not a phenomenon of monologues, but bound to a certain type of acting together. For these reasons, the chapter takes a closer look at confidence building between teacher and students.*

### INTRODUCTION

Students who were afraid of using a computer had to learn how to adequately care for people with dementia within seven months with the help of the Internet. Based on the approaches by Martin Buber, Heinrich Rombach and Martin Wagenschein, results of effective, efficient and sustainable learning

in a highly restricted and only roughly structured context are described which rely on autopoietic learning, changing between dyadic 'dialogues' and a dialogue with the student body, involving attitudes and a fresh focus on asking questions.

First, the character of the learning situation at hand will be described so that a transfer of the pedagogic and didactic chances to transform

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a teaching-learning context to comparable, but different contexts can follow. A discussion of selected basic aspects of communication between teachers and students will follow. Furthermore, the developmental stages in co-evolutionary problem solving of answering students and asking teachers will be described.

A little experiment shall introduce the topic: an exercise in semantic differentiation. Take the following statement, probably known from rhetorical manuals, and let it sink in: “The one who asks a question is the one who leads.” Next do the same with a recombination of the wording: “The one who leads is the one who asks questions.” The point is the realisation of nuances in meaning, which are shaped by culture. What are the similarities and differences in “feeling” when saying statement one and two?

The findings of this little experiment will be taken up in a more direct way in the course of this chapter. To put it in a nutshell: If someone realises a difference, a certain curiosity about the topic at hand will arise: subtle distinctions in approaching interpersonal interactions, which will make all the difference in the results of student-teacher cooperation.

The following describes the practical framework of the experiment: The private vocational school used for this experiment is situated in the German town of Zittau (28,000 inhabitants) right at the borders to Poland and the Czech Republic. The town has lost approx. 12,000 inhabitants, first of all due to people leaving this area after the turnover of 1989.

The vocational school, not named here on purpose, is part of a large network of vocational and training schools in private ownership with more than 100 subsidiaries in Germany, enjoying mostly a very good reputation. It is well integrated into the regional infrastructure and first choice for the local job centres when qualifying unemployed people.

The teachers in the field of psychology and sociology were challenged with training highly motivated students coming with high expectations back to school. The task was to prepare them for job routines where excessive demands are put on staff under conditions which can be compared to a mission impossible. As no established teaching material was available, it was important to provide students with practical help in solving typical conflicts thus making them feel more secure. On the other hand, students needed to be sensitized to apply standard recommendations according to different contexts.

The training time was much too short to teach psychological basics about psychiatric syndromes with geriatric patients, their diagnostics and forms of intervention in detail. Additionally, psychological theories are far from being integrative so that clear-cut, unambiguous best practise cannot be taught. When working in care institutions, students were faced with highly contradictory opinions and practises according to the psychological doctrine applied. Consequently, students came back to classes with the question about right and wrong. The motto “Live and let live” is a good characterisation of the relationship offered by the students to their teachers in this shared situation.

First we will have a closer look at the distinction between techniques and attitudes before concentrating on “technical” aspects of the role models of teachers in the field of attitudes, be it for the worst or best for their students.

Martin Wagenschein serves here as an important source of inspiration. The slogan “brave the gap,” which is highly popular with students, can be traced back to this educationalist of natural sciences who has seemed to be nearly forgotten for decades. Our experiment, however, was not about bravery. Students of a four-year university course are not expected to successfully apply psychological diagnostics and interventions. When training students to care for people with dementia in a seven-month course, however, this claim seems

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