# Space for understanding in higher education – a case study

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## Abstract

*Space for understanding in higher education – a case study.* – The concept of teaching as an expert activity and a broad profession, abandonment of the model of the so-called minimal competence where the core teacher's activity is the transmission of course knowledge, alternatively skills training. The teacher's expert activity is connected with the skill of raising questions, assigning stimulating tasks, reflecting students' results and modifying the teacher's methods with respect to the outcomes of communication with students. Assumptions of making space for understanding in higher education include: rejecting the instant knowledge and enforcing relevant didactic models.

A model of didactic knowledge of content – a direct link of teacher's didactic activity with his/her knowledge of content. A model of pedagogical decision-making – understanding, transformation, giving knowledge, evaluation, reflection and new understanding. A model of didactic reconstruction. The importance of productive interviewing. A dialogue in pedagogical process. Methods of making space for understanding and the establishment of understanding. The place of ICT when making space for understanding. The content of the paper will be based on 189 mind maps and essays of students from the Faculty of Informatics and Management from 2008 to 2017. There is an example of one mind map from 2017 in the paper.

Students and teachers realize the *uncommon place* of understanding and identify themselves with the idea that for clearing the ground of communication it is not sufficient to be verbally skilled.

**Keywords:** understanding, education, communication, didactic model, mind map

**Klíčová slova:** chápání, vzdělávání, komunikace, didaktický model, myšlenková mapa

## 1 Introduction

Ideas about changing the concept of teaching come hand in hand with the ever increasing requirements on education and in connection with the possibilities, limits and pitfalls of technologies. Ideas about a model of so called broad profession are being pushed through while the model of so called minimal competence is being written off.

This model with the ground activities of a teacher, transmission of course knowledge alternatively skills training related to the concrete course. The model of so called broad profession brings about the idea of teacher's activities as the one who cares about overall cultivation of the pupil or student. He/she is capable of reflection and self-reflection, strives to remove barriers in understanding and understands the teaching profession as an activity of an

expert. The teacher is an expert who facilitates learning processes and brings about space for understanding, favourable conditions and stimulating opportunities for releasing students' potential.[1]

Space for understanding is connected with communicative rationality which does not go with the symbols of language and the activity of speech *per se* only, but manifests itself in the unifying power of speech which is focused on understanding. This for the participating speakers also means at the same time sharing the topic intersubjectively. The common ground for communication with the common horizon provides the possibility of factual meeting of the researched "thing". In the pedagogical process it is essential to upgrade and specify the common ground of communication. Teachers must be aware of their own share when interpreting the extent of understanding from the side of the students as a group and as well as individuals. Here come at hand didactic models and result analysis, relevant content of works – creation of mind maps resulting in reflections on the issues of sources and causes of misunderstanding or ways how to overcome misunderstanding.

## 2  Didactic models

To the requisites of creating space for understanding belongs the refusal of instant knowledge and enforcing relevant didactic models. Didactic models are understood as applications of pedagogical theory and focus on looking for ways to make students understand their field of study. Higher education in the Czech Republic applies mainly the model of didactic content knowledge and the model of didactic reconstruction.

### 2.1  Model of didactic content knowledge

The model of didactic content knowledge comes out of the situation that the teacher understands what the students are going to learn, why and what means and methods they are going to use;[2] this is included in the course syllabus.

A well theoretically (with respect to his field of study), psychologically, pedagogically and didactically prepared teacher is competent to understand the plurality of perspectives which are to be approached as for the topic and is also competent to understand the possible different solutions of the students. Teachers also facilitate to create cognitive structures, stress the possibilities of intertwining ideas across various areas of research, clarifying relations in everyday life, knowledge of contexts in education, aims and key values in education. Such kind of understanding gives ground for didactic knowledge enabling teachers to open the access to procedures and ideas for their students.

This goes hand in hand with the teacher's decision making process which includes understanding (view into the course structure and identification of essential ideas inside and outside the discipline), transformation (content knowledge is transformed into pedagogically effective procedures and adjusted to concrete groups of students in various forms of studies – full time, blended, distance), *transmitting knowledge, evaluation, reflection and new understanding.*

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[1] PELCOVÁ, Naděžda, SEMRÁDOVÁ, Ilona. *Fenomén výchovy a etika učitelského povolání*. Praha: Karolinum, 2014.
[2] JANÍK, Tomáš a kol. *Pedagogical content knowledge, nebo didaktická znalost obsahu*. Brno: Paido, 2007.

Expert activity of the teacher is connected to the skills of raising questions, assigning inspirational tasks, reflecting students' results and modifying their approaches with regard to the outcomes of the communication with students; these are the only ways how to contribute to the creation of a quality space for understanding.

2.2 Model of didactic reconstruction

The model of didactic reconstruction is based on the pedagogical and didactic tradition, coming out of Klafki's (1967) asking about sense. The teacher is required to show the significance *why* and *how* the topic he is about to explain in his lesson is significant for the student. That is why the central starting point is the ethical concept leading to the emphasis on the responsibility of the teacher. Klafki's model is followed by the model of didactic reconstruction of the course content with regard to the current theoretical knowledge and pragmatic needs of the students to show how skilled they are to find adequate ways in our varied world and at the same time not to come down to job performance and job efficiency only. The conceptions of teachers are confronted with students' ideas.

In such a way all can participate in creating space for understanding. In this connection it is advantageous to use not only personal communication and the content of students' essays, but also the options of electronic communication or expressing ideas in evaluation questionnaires within the framework of study information systems.

**3 Productive queries**

In 2008–2018 within the framework of hermeneutically taught seminars and seminars in translating students themselves created 189 mind maps and related essays. Mind maps and essays were focused on cause of mutual misunderstanding and the possibilities to overcome the barriers through an authentic dialogue.

Most students meet with the creation of mind maps for the first time; that is the reason why the task was formed in a simple way. Their task was to associate freely ideas, questions, motives and problems connected with the crucial idea to make the most of their ideas – see picture.

**In the essay** related to the same topic the students were to structure their ideas logically hierarchize them and come with conclusions to the options of understanding. Through the frequency analysis based on the causes for misunderstanding answers were pinpointed (in one mind map and the related essay were of course more relevant motives found). These can be identified in the following survey. Most answers were related to a type questions, unique authentic answers are rare.

**Survey**

- different languages 189
- different cultural background 189
- different evaluation systems 189
- generation clashes 70
- different philosophies and religions 153

- insufficient social and emotional intelligence 147
- insufficient knowledge 147
- problems with the degree of intellectual capacity 147
- incompatibility, misunderstanding between men and women 132
- inability to form questions 117
- lack of information 112
- inability to ask questions 109
- unfamiliarity of context questions 101
- negative approach to the topic 96
- negative approach to person/persons 96
- lack of attention, swings in attention 81
- indifference to the topic 72
- indifference to the man who informs us about something 72
- indifference in general 72
- parallel monologues without sharing 65
- simplifying, seeing things in black and white 51
- interpretation errors 51
- we do not link analogical and digital dimension of communication 43
- intolerance 43
- arrogance, superiority towards the speaker 43
- short temper 43
- oversensitivity in relation to the topic 41
- exacerbation of the emotionally exalted situation 41
- exaggerated self-confidence, persuasion about one's own truth 37
- superficiality 36
- emotional lability in general 31
- weakening by illness or accident 31
- unwillingness to listen, accept, respect 27
- inability to grasp the heart of the matter 25
- ignorance of the used professional terminology 25
- range of 25
- mental disorder 24
- problems with articulation 22
- possibility of various interpretations 22
- we hear but not listen 22
- lack of time 21
- unwillingness to stop and think 19
- the approach "must try hard" is not popular 19
- speech is reduced as a means 19
- to understand is taken for granted 16
- we do not understand ourselves and that is why we cannot understand others 15
- ignorance of the translation field of study 15
- inability to choose the right equivalent when translating 14
- lack of knowledge of conditions when a piece of art was commenced 12
- discrepancies between wanting and the real situation 12
- we'd rather not understand, we fear to understand 11
- cautiousness – we prefer not to believe 11
- unwillingness, unhelpfulness 11

- animosity, hostility 11
- we want to keep distance 1
- lack of invention 9
- in speech we can conceal, pretend and lie 9
- contradictory communication 7
- overpowering impact of media and technologies 7
- intonation, gestures and mimics are not legible 6
- ambiguousness of communication 6
- lack of preunderstanding 6
- prejudices 5
- naivety 4
- we do not want to get involved 4
- inability of transcendence 2

And now some authentic statements as an illustration:

- "we are not on the same wavelength"
- "one does not know that he does not know that he does not understand"
- "there is no chemistry between us"
- "we live in our bubbles"
- "thinking hurts and a deep thought is annoying"
- "our must be done, needs to be done, must be done quickly patterns"

As students are authors of the essays and are made familiar with their colleagues' essay results, they are aware of the variety of possible sources of misunderstanding where understanding is not being taken for granted. In the seminar discussion conditions and prerequisites for understanding are being pointed out. Relation moments of communication are stressed and identified. Students are shown that the clarity of communication is not based on verbal and rhetorical or writing skills only.

Also the eLearning platform is being made use of, where learners can explain, defend or leave once they see the groundlessness of their concepts.

## 4  Conclusion

Misinterpretation and not meeting at "things", misunderstanding, and improper understanding are often accompanying phenomena in the area of communication the teaching/learning process. A teacher who is capable of reflection and self-reflection is fully aware of it and this is the reason why he thoughtfully thinks over, revises and looks for new ways for his approaches, solutions, methods and tasks he assigns to his learners. The quality of communicative processes can be proved by feedback mechanisms. In this respect the possibilities of individualized communication (via ICT) in the process of education so far and also with regard to time demanding aspect and other requirements placed on the teacher in higher education as for the demands for higher qualification are used especially in doctoral study forms.

The way to share analogical communication output is connected with the always increasing development of dialogues with the aim to transform the passive uninterested

information consumer into an active recipients who will open their versions of understanding for further development and reflection which makes ways to create knowledge, builds links not only in the cognitive sphere, but also in the sphere of experience and applicability. Reception is not understood as absorbing served contents, but as active (selective, interpreted and contextually conditioned) performance.

**Picture – Mind map** (the author of which is a 21 year old student of Management of Tourism-German language)
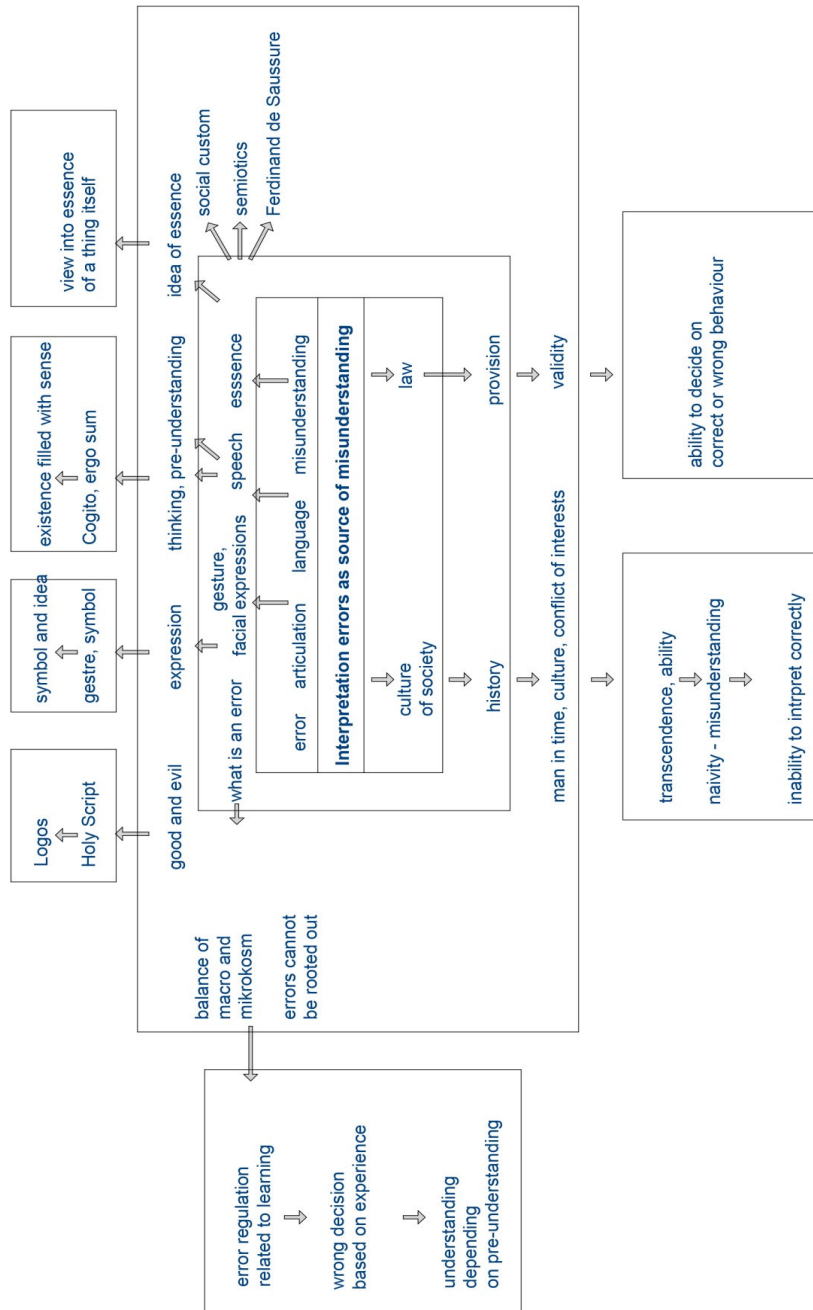
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