

Pros and Cons



Whose Knowledge? Which Knowledge? Reflections on Teacher Education

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The relative weight given to theory and practice at teacher colleges (pedagogical faculties of universities) should be valued differently than it is at research universities and faculties. Teacher colleges and their staffs cannot properly be judged strictly by the number of pages of articles in influential scientific journals. If they are – which is currently the case in the Czech Republic – faculty members will not be motivated to involve themselves in coursework dedicated to the real pre-service training of real teachers.

If theory dominates over training, the students feel insecure on entering their teacher jobs. They know well how ill-prepared they are to face real-life situations among children and colleagues. They sense how feeble their theoretical knowledge is, as they come face-to-face with a class of adolescents. Young teachers know how little they have profited from lectures on psychological personality types or the history of 19th century Central European pedagogy.

Teachers in Czech schools who have graduated from Czech teacher colleges in the past twenty years seem to be – in the vast majority of cases – ill-prepared, both in their teaching skills and in the attitudes now generally considered to be important for life in the 21st century. The so-called *life-skills*, or *European competencies*, as well as *critical thinking* and *active learning*, are only now starting to appear as educational goals in official state documents

on educational policy. But few teachers have ever been trained to teach using these new competencies, and a significant number of them do not yet consider such skills to be important or valuable. The traditional values attached to school learning are the *knowledge of facts, disciplined behavior* (mostly understood as *obedience*) and the maintenance of *safety and security*.

What is knowledge, after all?

In our international community (of Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking), we need to truly understand how we apprehend the word *knowledge*, or whatever words express this concept in your own language. The point here is not to find a good translation of the English word, but rather to take this opportunity to discuss our mental concepts – and verbal representations – of “knowing about ...”, “getting acquainted with ...”, and “knowing how to ...”

Let's look at the Czech words used to express this concept. In Czech the word usually used for “knowledge” is *znalosti*, which means “remembering facts, names, data”, but the Czech language does not have a clear term that encompasses skills as well as facts. The English word *knowledge* means not only *znalosti* – remembering – but also “understanding” and “knowing how to do and being able to do”. Another Czech word *vědění* (“knowing”) is related to the word *věda* – “science” but its scope is narrower than *věda*, and it is quite a bookish word. It also means less than *znalosti*, even if this time it includes also “knowing the principles and basic concepts”. The word *ovládání* has the meaning of “maintaining, achieving skills” but in the phrase *ovládat látku*,

učivo it means “to have a thorough knowledge of the subject matter”, which for most teachers is equivalent to “remember many facts”. In Czech this term can actually exclude “deeper understanding” because the teachers who say *Student ovládá učivo* most often mean “She can use all the terms and give their definitions”. The words *porozumění* or *chápání* also mean understanding, but in this case teachers can ignore the application of the matter, its usage. The most general expression is the most misleading one: *umět* – “be able to”. Outside of school it really means “be able to do something, to accomplish something”. Within school it means, alas, “to respond to the teachers’ demands in the expected way” – and the student is most often expected to conform to the teacher’s own way of understanding, and to repeat the words of the teacher or the textbook, to provide products of prescribed form and content. In Czech we do not have a good expression for the combined meaning of *know and be able to*.

Even if many of the above mentioned elements of knowledge are important and have their value, they should not overshadow or even supplant the value of other educational goals: **skills, motivation, and interpersonal relations**. Therefore the activities of university teacher-training colleges cannot focus mainly or exclusively on research and building new theories, or on coining new terms for old concepts.

Bad trees bear bad fruit

1. Another argument for a change in the system of assessment of teacher colleges can be found in the results of PISA, the latest OECD

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comparative study on reading literacy, mathematical literacy and science literacy in 32 countries. According to the PISA study (see *Thinking Classroom* vol. 3, no. 2), fifteen-year-old Czechs are just under the world's average in reading and maths (and still quite good in biology). Czech students do know what a text is talking about, but they can seldom say why the text was written, or for whom, what its communicative functions are, or what a text means in relation to a given situation.

2. A teacher of Earth science teaching sixth-graders in a western suburb of Prague lectures on the processes of folding in geomorphology. Just 700 meters from his classroom there is a world-famous geological site that would provide visible answers to all his pupils' questions. But he never takes the children to the old quarry, and he has no idea it is even there, right in the neighborhood.

3. A physics teacher, who happens to be on the opposite side of Prague, explains weight and measurement to his seventh-graders. He brings a precious apparatus for weighing things into the classroom to show to his pupils, but never lets them touch it. They might forget to turn off the scale, or it might get broken.

4. An older woman teaching speech and grammar in another city addresses a 14-year-old girl in front of the class – she mocks the girl's make-up, her awkward body movements, and her ability to think. The class joins in.

Where should we learn to teach?

These examples are far from rare. The teachers referred to here graduated from universities after

five years of exacting scientific studies in their fields. Their syllabi contained historical grammar, mathematical analysis or the names of all the tributaries of the Amazon River. They had to write and defend a thesis replete with scientific concepts and terms, exact quotations and scientific proofs. With the demands of their studies, they had little time to waste on finishing their own growth – on developing into wise, reflective adult persons – although they had to listen to lectures on the development of personality. They spent only brief periods in direct contact with children – most of them sat for up to a hundred hours observing in classes and only some 20 hours in their own classroom practice during their five years of university studies. The demands of their scientific efforts left them with little time for thorough discussion and reflection on their experiences, or for their own questions as learners and teachers.

Their university teachers had come through the same training, after all. Even in those rare cases where instructors had been recruited from the ranks of teachers in the field, these faculty members did not represent the most creative and inventive educators. The university professors choose the ones like themselves. The pre-service students seldom encounter a model, competent teacher. Worse than that, it is those university professors who play important roles within their faculties who often serve as models for the insecure young teachers seeking to establish authority in a classroom full of independent and self-conscious high school students.

Quo usque tandem...?

Given current educational trends, a huge discrepancy is likely to develop between school practices and the beliefs of university teachers (as well as the members of the university accreditation committees who approve the syllabi of the colleges, and the decision makers in educational policy). How can they maintain the system of college accreditation by counting the number of articles in scientific journals and the number of senior professors and their titles, while at the same time they contend that education and knowledge are not merely the sum of memorized facts? In the meantime – before this gap becomes too obvious and shameful – the fresh graduates from our teacher colleges will find better-paid jobs in business, and those who dare to address the reality of the schools will sooner or later leave, too. The quality of high school graduates – the potential applicants to the universities – will decrease, the number of future scientists will diminish, and the formerly well-regarded “scientific” universities will close down. Finding talented, open-minded young students for teacher colleges will become even harder if applicants have rarely been exposed to good and dedicated teachers in action.

Could an international discussion offer better ways to evaluate and accredit teacher colleges?

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