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## THE PERSON AND HIS DEVELOPMENT. THE GESTALT APPROACH IN ACADEMIC EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary European integration, including, among others, the popularisation of academic education in the new EU Member States, is accompanied by many positive and negative phenomena. For example, supporters of democratisation of education emphasize not only the socially important effects of inclusion of previously excluded groups, but also competitiveness between higher education institutions. On the other hand, opinions are voiced about the danger of *overeducating* the society, i.e. the lack of correlation between the needs of the market and the structure of professions and the actual competences of university graduates<sup>2</sup>. In the situation of such contradictions, attention to the level of academic education and its improvement is becoming increasingly important. Looking at these measures from the perspective of humanistic pedagogy, one should naturally lean towards an individual

<sup>1</sup> Originally published: Wiktor Żłobicki, "Osoba i jej rozwój w edukacji akademickiej", [in:] *Kompetencje absolwentów szkół wyższych na miarę czasów: wybrane ujęcia*, [in:] *Wokół problemów socjologii edukacji i badań młodzieży*, ed. A. Szerłaż, Oficyna Wydaw. Atut, Wrocławskie Wydaw. Oświatowe, Wrocław 2009, p. 75–83.

<sup>2</sup> See Z. Melosik, "Edukacja a stratyfikacja społeczna", [in:] *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki*, Vol. 2, ed. Z. Kwieciński, B. Śliwerski, Warszawa 2003, p. 357.

who, endowed with intellectual predispositions, perceives academic education as a personal goal, serving his own development and only as a natural consequence offering profits in professional life. Here we can invoke Bogdan Suchodolski's ever topical observation that

science is not only of indirect significance for people in that it furthers the bettering of material and social living conditions in all areas, but also has a direct meaning in that it shapes people's consciousness in a valuable way, and at the same time awakens in them intellectual needs, enriching their life quality, cooperating in experiencing the meaning of life, endowing them with a specific sense of happiness, which is born out of the pursuit of truth<sup>3</sup>.

At present, there are three scenarios which academic education can follow<sup>4</sup>. The first one – subordinating education to the laws of economics and the market – would lead to the atrophy of students' personal development. The second, maximum scenario (in the full sense of the word) assumes that widespread higher education would contribute to the inflation of diplomas and personal educational disappointments of many students. Such a phenomenon can be seen e.g. among graduates of law schools and pedagogical faculties. The third scenario can be described as a search for a *golden means* between the needs of the labour market and the right of every human being to use their potential and personal development. Therefore, I will devote further considerations to the problem of the development of the person who takes up higher education. The theoretical context of these considerations is the Gestalt approach, the essence of which is a holistic vision of the human being and his/her relationship with the world, a harmonious development of personal resources and creative fulfilment of the unique abilities of every human being<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> B. Suchodolski, *Wychowanie i strategia życia*, Warszawa 1983, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> See Z. Melosik, "Edukacja a stratyfikacja społeczna", op. cit., p. 360.

<sup>5</sup> A broad view on the Gestalt approach in education is offered in the monograph: W. Żłobicki, *Edukacja holistyczna w podejściu Gestalt. O wspieraniu rozwoju osoby*, Kraków 2008.

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A NOTION OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Considerations about the development of a person are inseparably connected with the assumption that a person is by nature a being growing not only physically but also mentally. Consistently adopting the humanistic paradigm, we can say that the personhood of a person is the result of the development of his or her own natural predispositions. As Karen Horney wrote: "Under favorable conditions man's energies are put into the realization of his own potentialities"<sup>6</sup>. This does not mean that this development is identical for different people. In her study on human development conditions, the author clearly emphasized that we are dealing with a complicated process, contingent on a variety of factors.

According to his particular temperament, faculties, propensities, and the conditions of his earlier and later life, he may become softer or harder, more cautious or more trusting, more or less self-reliant, more contemplative or more outgoing; and he may develop his special gifts. But wherever his course takes him, it will be his given potentialities which he develops<sup>7</sup>.

The problem of personal development was also examined by Abraham Maslow, who, while creating his theory of personality, formulated a theory that a person is endowed with a being potentially existing in him or her, which comes to the fore in a more complete or, conversely, a more limited way<sup>8</sup>. The full realisation of this potential, or the pursuit of destruction, can take place both in the earliest stages of human development, when it is almost defenceless and dependent on the care of adults, and in later life. If, however, optimal conditions are provided during the course of development, then a harmonious path of full development becomes possible, in accordance with this primordial nature of man. It enables the realisation of the human potential. If the conditions in which a person lives inhibit this potential, then coping mechanisms come into play, which in the initial phase enable

<sup>6</sup> K. Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth. The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, New York 1950, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> See A. H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, New York 1968.

him/her to survive in difficult moments, but with time can block this spontaneous development.

Deliberations on the concept of development must inevitably reference Carl R. Rogers' approach focused on the person. According to the author, man is born with an individual development potential and a strong desire to realize this potential, i.e. with what he calls a tendency for *self-actualisation*<sup>9</sup>. It is assumed, therefore, that human nature is positive, among other things because it manifests itself in the tendency towards development. Human needs, aspirations and drives are a manifestation of this aspiration and lead to the development of the individual, while developmental disorders, e.g. antisocial behaviour, are the effect of acquiring experience in a pathological environment.

Drawing on Carl R. Rogers' views, we can say that every human being perceives the world in a unique way and these observations create this individual's phenomenological field<sup>10</sup>. Although the personal, private world of the human person is difficult to examine objectively, we can try to perceive and interpret it as it appears to the individual. In other words, we can see and try to analyse the behaviour of a particular person through the prism of his or her own cognition. The spirit of cognition understood in this way lies in a phenomenological way of perceiving reality, emphasizing understanding and interpreting how people experience themselves and the world they live in. Carl R. Rogers therefore stressed the need to understand the subjective experience of every human being, i.e. the phenomenological field of a specific person. Rogers' notion of self-actualisation as the underlying motif of human activity provided an alternative to psychoanalytical theories. This concept implies constant opening to experiences and readiness to integrate these experiences into the increasingly developing sense of the Self. Carl R. Rogers also formulated a hypothesis that man functions in such a way as to experience inner cohesion and maintain a balance between perception, sensing his *Self* and experience. The universality of Rogers' concentration on the person allows us to determine the optimal conditions for subjective learning, and consequently also for development. The basis for this is the belief in the learner's abilities, which significantly

<sup>9</sup> See C. R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person. A Therapist View of Psychotherapy*, Boston 1961, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> See L. A. Pervin, O. P. John, *Personality: Theory and Research*, New York 2001, p. 168.

influences the role of the person helping in learning. First of all, there is no need to control the learning process, manipulate or control the learner, because growth, development, self-actualization, and internal compatibility are the basic activities of each and every person. Secondly, it is necessary to refer to the relationship between the pedagogue and the learner. Of paramount importance here is the pedagogue's focus on understanding the learner. Thirdly, in person-centred learning, authenticity is of key importance; authenticity is the extent to which people who meet each other behave in harmony with their own *Selves*.

Drawing on his own and his collaborators' many years of experience, Carl R. Rogers stressed that the use of a person-oriented approach in psychotherapy and education effectively triggers constructive changes in personality and behaviour and thus fosters development<sup>11</sup>. In such a conducive climate, a person, being free to choose any direction of activity, picks a constructive and positive path and, as a result, takes full advantage of the realisation tendency.

In order to explain even more precisely the relationship between Rogers' learning and development, it is advisable to pay attention to a few issues<sup>12</sup>. Firstly, for various reasons, many learners are unaware of their potential to acquire knowledge. In such a situation, it is easy to manipulate roles by building a strong authority of an academic and a defencelessness of students against this authority. Therefore, an important element of the professional role of a teacher is to help learners to discover their own abilities and to support their development in such a way that they do not cross the boundary when aspirations, instead of stimulating, can become an impediment to development. Secondly, genuine cooperation between learners and those who assist their learning process to further intense development; we need the inclusion of learners into the process of program development in line with their level of self-awareness. They should know what to learn, how, when and where. Thirdly, studying is a development process that is not confined to university premises. Therefore, it does not begin and end in classrooms, but continues even outside the university. It has its own dynamics, i.e. periods of high intensity and effectiveness, but also times of slowdown

<sup>11</sup> See C. R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Egan, *The Skilled Helper. A Problem-Management Approach to Helping*, Pacific Grove 1998, p. 52–55.

or even block. This means that effective assistance and support in development can be talked about only when the individual learner, at his or her own pace – sometimes slower, other times faster – discovers his or her hitherto unused potential and applies it in practice.

## HOLISM AS THE FOUNDATION OF EDUCATION

Holism as one of the key terms related to the Gestalt approach in education comes from the Greek *holos* (whole) and was disseminated by Jan Christian Smuts<sup>13</sup>, who put forward a theory of cognition based on three fundamental assumptions. First, the human being experiences the immediate environment with all of the senses; Smuts was inspired here by Kantian philosophy. Second, perception of reality is holistic rather than fragmentary, which means that the whole is something else and something more than just a sum total of the individual parts. Here Jan C. Smuts was indebted to Plato. Third, holism is a tendency of the parts to merge into a whole. This way of ordering the world was encountered by Smuts in Hegel. The essence of holism, or a holistic view of the world, was also presented by one of the greatest scholars, Albert Einstein, who wrote that:

Man is a part of the whole, which we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something that is separated from everything else, a kind of optical illusion of consciousness. This illusion is a sort of prison that limits us to our own tastes and inclinations towards the few close to us. Our goal should be to free ourselves from this prison. This will happen when we broaden the horizon of our compassion to such an extent that it embraces all living creatures and all nature with all its beauty<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Christian Smuts was not only a philosopher, who in 1925 published the book *Holism and Evolution*. He was also an eminent politician who put his philosophical views into practice. For instance, he opposed racial discrimination and colonialism. He was one of the initiators of the League of Nations and later a supporter of the establishment of the United Nations, for which he drafted the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations.

<sup>14</sup> H. Dauber, *Podstawy pedagogiki humanistycznej. Zintegrowane układy między terapią i polityką*, Kraków 2001, p. 78.

Albert Einstein's ideas and his theory of relativity have contributed to the fact that holism has become an important concept in the humanities. The idea of holism also appears among the anthropological premises of the Gestalt approach, which stems from the belief that the human being:

- is in fact trustworthy;
- has a huge potential and capacities whose application calls for the creation of appropriate conditions;
- is a social being;
- is inherently active, changes through its own activity and interaction with the environment;
- strives for a comprehensive development of his/her skills and capabilities<sup>15</sup>.

## EDUCATION IN THE GESTALT APPROACH AS AN OPPORTUNITY OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A UNIVERSITY

All the above premises indicate that human behaviour can only be understood holistically. Therefore, as a subject of the body, psyche and spirit, man lives in an inseparable connection with the ecological and social environment and builds his identity through interactions with that environment. In the university environment, the essence of such interactions is the study, which Wincenty Okoń defines as “learning at a higher level – starting from the first years of higher education – with maximum own initiative and independence”<sup>16</sup>. It can be concluded that the period of study is an ideal period of education that is conducive to personal development, based on a process of contact between the individual and the environment. In the model solution, the student is in contact with the educational content and creates his or her own knowledge in a dynamic interpersonal system. The content of education should be understood as “any accumulated and generalized experience of humanity, which due to its value has been included in the curricula”

<sup>15</sup> See O. A. Burow, K. Scherpp, *Lernziel: Menschlichkeit. Gestaltpädagogik – eine Chance für Schule und Erziehung*, München 1981, p. 124; B. Śliwerski, *Współczesne teorie i nurty wychowania*, Kraków 1998, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 1996, p. 269.

and knowledge is “everything that a learner assimilates by dealing with the content of education”<sup>17</sup>. To characterise the process of contact between the learner and the educational content, we can invoke an analogy from the Gestalt therapy between the consumption and digestion of food. The learner initiates contact, i.e. stimulates “appetite”, recognizing an area of interest in the educational content provided. From among the contents with which the individual is in contact, he/she chooses (i.e. “consumes”) something and then processes (i.e. “chews”) it, building in, expanding and renewing his/her personal knowledge. As a result, the process of contact enters its final phase - assimilation and integration of knowledge (i.e. “digestion”)<sup>18</sup>.

If knowledge is to be considered a creative act, inseparably connected with the human need for self-fulfilment, then the desire to acquire knowledge is an inherent feature of the human being. However, contemporary man is forced to live in an extremely complicated world, in an increasing alienation from nature, which results in a distorted feeling of the dynamics of his own internal processes. Civilization processes have long been violating psychological, ecological and social foundations of human life. These phenomena have also affected universities. No wonder that the process of an individual’s contact with the world, and above all the assimilation and integration of educational content, is disturbed. Universities continue to pay little attention to the individual’s own cognitive activity, sensual cognition and emotions accompanying the learning process. The assumed effectiveness of teaching processes results in imposing contact with educational content (usually reduced to verbalism), and the complex mechanisms of control of learning outcomes assess the amount of assimilated content rather than personal knowledge. Therefore, students are forced to “swallow” rather than “chew” the content. In short, the disturbed process of contact with educational content makes it only partially assimilated and integrated with the current knowledge of the student. At the same time, the connotation of the notion of “development” in contemporary education is connected with a specific way of thinking about the effectiveness of higher education determined by a linear, systematic

<sup>17</sup> See R. Fuhr, “Pedagogika Gestalt. Dostęp do wiedzy osobistej”, [in:] *Nieobecne dyskursy*, part 1, ed. Z. Kwieciński, Toruń 1991, p. 144–152.

<sup>18</sup> See *Ibidem*, p. 146–147.

and, most importantly, measurable increase of learners' competences. In such a perception of the student's development, stagnation, mistakes and regress are mostly unacceptable. Does the Gestalt approach permit a different view of the problem? Well, one can refer here to the claim put forth by Joseph Zinker, who suggests:

Look at man the way you would look at the sunset or the mountains. Accept what you see with pleasure. Accept man for what he is. This is what you would do in the case of the sunset. You would not say: 'this sunset should be more purple' or 'these mountains should be higher in the middle part'. You would simply stare with admiration. The same is true of another human being. I look at him and do not say, 'his skin should be more pink', or 'his hair should be cut shorter'. The human being simply is<sup>19</sup>.

This metaphor does not exclude the educational intentionality of academic teachers, but rather leads to reflection on what students really learn in and outside their universities; how the social environment can hinder the development of intellect, emotions and creative action; what share do academic teachers have in this?

Under the Gestalt approach: "learning takes place on the border of contact" and this border is the place where we recognise and decide to open up to something new in our lives<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, one of the important assumptions of Gestalt is to recognize the phenomenon of contact as the basis for teaching and learning. In the process of contact we can distinguish several phases:

- initiating contact (e.g. searching for a topic, uncovering the needs, searching for ways to raise motivation to act, familiarity with the problem, etc.);
- taking up an activity (trying different activities using all available means);
- integrating experiences (one's various collected experiences can be ordered, rejected, evaluated, differentiated, etc.);
- making solutions (an awareness of the results achieved in the action and of new problems to be solved emerges).

<sup>19</sup> J. C. Zinker, *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, Brunner/Mazel, New York 1977, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> O. A. Burow, *Grundlagen der Gestaltpädagogik*, verlag modernes lernen, Dortmund 1988, p. 84.

The above approach to the educational process is illustrated in the diagram below:

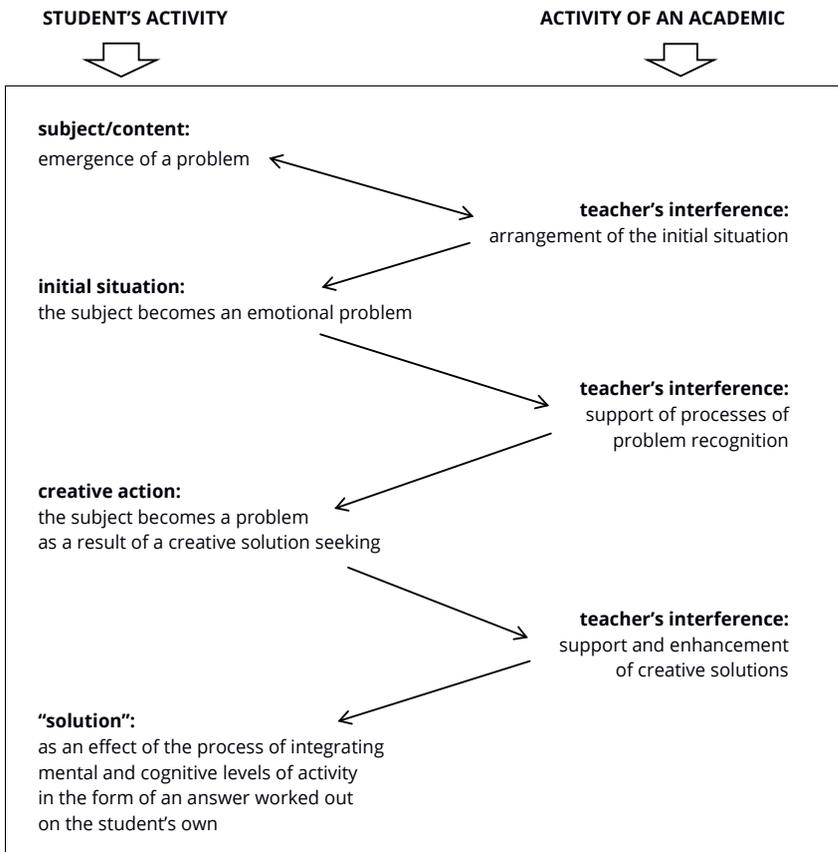


Fig. 1. Model of activity structure in Gestalt (source: H. Dauber, *Podstawy pedagogiki humanistycznej*, op. cit., p. 181).

The diagram above can be interpreted as follows. At the outset, it should be understood that teaching is the creation of learning opportunities, the support of learning, while learning is a conscious process of developing and applying new cognitive and emotional experiences in action and their mutual and holistic treatment. Then it becomes the teacher's task to support students to ask questions, take action in a problematic or conflicting situation. Teaching and learning thus become a creative process between the learner and the one who helps

to learn. Such experience of answering important questions, gained independently during one’s studies, may be a source of new topics and new questions. A willingness to explore the world and new, extremely important experiences may emerge. An example of such action in the Gestalt approach may be taking up the problem of contacts with cancer patients during classes with medical students. Each of the future doctors in their future practice will certainly meet face-to-face with the patient who has been diagnosed with cancer. A suggestion to consider could be the organisation of workshops where the problem is raised: how should a medical student learn to talk to a cancer patient who asks the question: “What will happen to me?”

LEARNING BY PROVIDING INFORMATION	LEARNING BY EXPERIENCE
Standard reaction: – to acquire the best possible medical knowledge and to say: “We will try to help you”.	Rejecting the standard reaction: – trying to practice contact with the patient in „safe“ conditions during workshops (using e.g. drama), when medical knowledge is accompanied by the practiced skill of conducting a genuine dialogue with the patient.

The teacher’s actions can therefore be driven by two considerations: arranging the initial situation, initiating a learning process, or arousing interest on the one hand, and on the other hand responding to the learner’s problems or needs. Therefore, the academic teacher working in the Gestalt approach can both creatively support the process of seeking solutions by the student and creatively arrange the problem and arouse interest. Based on the above model, in the teaching process we start from the possibilities, needs and interests, and not from the curriculum content. The aim is to ensure that the acquired knowledge has a direct impact on the learner, engages his or her feelings, thoughts and inclines him or her to creative activity.

The Gestalt approach supports students in recognizing and understanding their own personality-determined ways of acquiring competence. The unique, individual character of learning understood in this way is determined by the principle: each person should be provided what they need here and now in order to develop and

satisfy their needs. Such an approach to learning is an alternative to the solution that is dominant in education: the same for everyone at the same time.

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### Abstract:

The Gestalt approach in education sees human beings and their relation with the world as a single whole. This assumption is a base for

methodology of development of human potential. In the article author paid attention to a few topics:

- many students are unaware of their potential and the educator is thus obliged to reveal it;
- the process of studying is dynamic;
- it has its periods of intensity and activity but also slowing down or even coming to a halt;
- the process of learning takes place not only within the walls of an academic institution, but also more often outside (for example the innovation and ground breaking research occurring in the labs of technology sector);
- the involvement of students in the development of the curriculum leads to positive results.

**Keywords:**

education, person, development, Gestalt, teaching, learning