

Handlungsorientierter Unterricht (Holistic and action-oriented learning and teaching)

Holistic, action-oriented learning and teaching (in German: handlungsorientierter Unterricht) are principles in schooling that take account of learners' undivided physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual preconditions in the learning process as well as their inherent human drive to be actively and whole-heartedly involved in relevant actions (Finkbeiner, 2002). The teaching approach based on this presupposition considers that learners make active use of both hemispheres of the brain (Löffler, 2002), thus including reason, intellect and consciousness on the one hand and feelings, emotions and *motivation on the other (Damasio, 2006). Furthermore, it includes learners' hearts, bodies and senses. As far as foreign language teaching is concerned this means that, far from regarding language use under purely cognitive and instrumental aspects, one also focuses on the affective and emotional domain as well as on motor functions. The individuals thereby are considered as *autonomous personalities that are encouraged to take responsibility for their language learning and use.

A multi-perspective approach, also called Human GPS (Finkbeiner, 2009), can help implement action-oriented and holistic learning. It includes more than two perspectives and integrates cognitive, meta-cognitive as well as socio-affective learning in a multi-sensory learning environment. Additionally, action-oriented and holistic teaching aim at building up three different but integrative parts of knowledge representation: declarative, procedural and situated knowledge (Garner, 1990; Finkbeiner, 2005). .

As learners are to acquire knowledge in an authentic setting in which the development of their autonomy and emancipation will be respected and valued learning strategies and learning techniques play an important role in action-oriented and holistic teaching. A multi-perspective approach with respect to all senses allows learners to not just see, but also hear, touch, smell, feel, taste and sense certain phenomena and experience accompanying motor functions. Researchers and authors referring to this kind of approach focus on the importance of primary experiences and *authenticity in learning (van Lier, 2007).. Language is the most important tool that allows human beings to initiate, be involved in, interfere and withdraw from any kind of actions, and in this respect, language is the most important resource for primary experiences from an ontogenetic point of view. Language and language related actions, therefore, are the most fundamental resource for a holistic, action-oriented way of foreign language teaching and learning.

Brain research

Learning a foreign language is considered as a fully integrative and holistic process that involves all faculties, such as hearing, sight, smell, touch, taste, and equilibrium when constructing meaning. Language processing, therefore, is based on the integrated activity of separately located faculties and body parts and thus of different areas of the brain. This is a very important hint as to linked and associated learning, but linking and individual and association do not only take place within cognition. Rather, they occur with the feelings, interest and motivational state of each individual (Damasio 2000, 2001, 2006; Bechara & Damasio 2005; Immordino-Yang & Damasio 2007). *Motivation and feelings which accompany the learning action are of fundamental importance, because parallel to the memorisation of the subject matter, the accompanying affective status is memorised at the same time. Learners are usually not aware of the latter, as it usually happens in a more subconscious and implicit way. Therefore, one can talk about two sides of a learning matter, simultaneously processed, stored and recalled as two tightly connected representations: the content and the affective state.

To take an example from research (Finkbeiner, 2005, 2006): Motivated *reading in a foreign language includes deep processing, such as the formation of elaborations, *transfer and inference. Elaborations, for example, allow readers to link up new information to their cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective prior experiences, thus making meaningful personal associations. Elaborations are holistic, and even action-oriented, yet in an abstract way: they do not include actual but mental pictures, not actual but mental sounds and voices, not actual but mental actions, yet they include actual feelings. Personal elaborations are most important in “holistic reading” as they function as a mediating variable between interest and deep level text processing and thus, become a predictor for learning success (Finkbeiner, 2005: 392-393). Thus, mental and actual experiences merge into each other and form a new kind of primary experience. Therefore, physiologically, motivated reading can have the same effect as the actual action itself. It also seems to allow flow to happen which in itself is a holistic experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This does not happen with unmotivated reading, which happens on a superficial level where elaborations are not possible, but where rather translation in a relatively verbatim manner occurs. To sum up, abstract actions such as reading can be considered as a holistic, action-oriented kind of learning, when deep processing occurs. This perspective allows us to transfer the approach to a higher, more academic level, and thus to implement it also for *adult learners.

Origins and history

Teaching foreign languages according to holistic, action-oriented principles follows a *humanistic view of the learner. To some extent this integrative teaching approach refers to principles from the history of pedagogy which can be traced back to *Comenius, and from there to Pestalozzi, Dewey, Montessori and numerous other reform pedagogues. (It has to be mentioned that the reform pedagogues referred to in this context are pedagogues representing

the Reform Pedagogy of the 1920s rather than the *Reform Movement in language teaching at the end of the nineteenth century.)

According to Comenius, for instance, teaching should be one wholly integrative, holistic and global process in which illustration, verbal representation and sensory-motor rehearsal and exercise are linked to each other so that they lead to a new kind of order. Pestalozzi focuses on teaching as a fully bodily experience connecting all senses (Finkbeiner, 1995). According to his humanist concept of learning, social relationships are crucial for successful learning. . The cooperative aspect makes peer tutoring possible. As a conclusion learners and teachers have interchangeable roles, as well as responsibilities (Finkbeiner, 2004). Dewey's (1933, 1997) philosophy of education and instrumentalism, which is also called pragmatism, points to learning-by-doing rather than rote learning and dogmatic instruction.

Reasons for the revival and the future relevance of the approach

The renaissance of this approach can be explained with reference to the following aspects: socio-theoretical, anthropological, learning psychological, didactic and methodological (Gudjons, 2008).

Socio-theoretical aspect

The rapid change of the world plays an important role in this consideration. Experiences are becoming increasingly abstract. Educational technology changes at lightning speed and often simulates “real life”. Therefore, handlungsorientierter Unterricht is an attempt to support students in actively acquiring culture authentically by means of pedagogically organised sequences of action.

Anthropological aspect

Students are to become aware of the fact that they are able to solve conflicts and problems because they are able to think and act competently (Finkbeiner, 1995). The focus here is on the dialectic view of the individuals and their environment. Cognition and thinking are understood as results of action on the one hand and as most important factors regulating actions on the other. Consequently, holistic teaching must seek to organise active and transparent tasks in order to initiate actions that involve thinking rather than merely presenting facts and knowledge.

Learning psychological aspect

The learning process is significantly supported and facilitated by means of practical experience and action with the object to be learned.

According to Leontjew's thesis (1982; see also Braun, 1982), the inner states of beings (the

subject) transform via the outer world (the object) and thus develop and change. Galperin develops a dialectical entity of action and consciousness that concentrates on this view of subject and object: the consciousness is formed by means of action. In return, this consciousness exerts influence on the activity of the subject (Galperin, 1974). The formation of the consciousness through the internalisation of outer and material actions to intellectual and lingual actions is at the heart of Galperin's theory of action. This assumption is important for language learning because it focuses on the different stages in *acquisition. The first stage deals with the material and 'outer' actions, which are transformed into language in a second stage. In the third stage, the language has fully developed and is independent of the material object, i.e. it is able to exist without it. An internal language is created in the fourth stage. The learning process is complete when the individual is able consciously and independently to apply the internalised activity.

Criteria and curriculum

The topics to be taught are selected from given curricula according to their exemplary value. Problem-solving becomes a process in which deep understanding of the subject matter involving critical thinking and linking with prior knowledge is possible. Learning is discovery and does not focus on mere repetition of facts.

The following criteria play a decisive role:

- Transparency of aim, content, methods and learning *assessment.
- Students' interests and experiences.
- Individualisation and socialisation.
- Sensory activity connecting mental and practical work.
- Students' activity and self-monitoring in planning, completing and evaluating their action.
- Focus on the social and emotional level.
- Holistic interplay of cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategic learning in a multi-sensory learning environment.
- Development of interlinked declarative, procedural and situated knowledge representations

Summary

It has to be mentioned that, despite the relevance of handlungsorientierter Unterricht, a universally valid theory and definition of action does still not exist. That might be due to the fact that, so far, there are only very few empirical studies in the field. A further difficulty lies in the fact that the term 'action' is often used in a very colloquial and unreflected sense. To avoid misunderstandings: holistic, action-oriented learning and teaching - handlungsorientierter Unterricht - are not compatible with a reductionist teaching of factual and theoretical knowledge in school. Rather, this approach seeks to develop a well balanced and dialectic relationship of theory and practice as well as of reflection and production. Yet,

the relationship of the scientific theoretical content and the orientation towards action and holism must be further elaborated, especially in consideration of the different school types and levels.

See also: Autonomy and autonomous learners; Fremdsprachendidaktik; Group work; Humanistic language teaching; Learning to learn; Reading; Strategies of language learning; Teaching methods

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CLAUDIA FINKBEINER