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Practitioner's note: Living interaction

Grundtvig's concept of 'living interaction' in student-teacher relations is not only a didactical principle about equal, eye-level conversation. It also encompasses a mutual way of life sustained and developed by conversation, which ideally flourishes at informal education institutions.

By Simon Finnerup

A Danish folk high school is a school where students and teachers live and learn together. The students are adult citizens, and the purpose is for students and teachers to become wiser in terms of our lives as social beings and obtain the courage to develop our society. Teaching in such a school isn't easy. You are suspended between a series of unavoidable paradoxes, where the teacher acts as both teacher and boarding school resident. On the one hand, you must be able to administer higher level teaching with strict adherence to scientific standards and professional

authority. On the other hand, and often simultaneously, the folk high school teacher is obliged to be a personal, friendly substitute mom/dad nurturing and framing the homeliness that characterizes folk high schools.

Teaching the whole human being

As such, we often use the phrase 'teaching the human as a whole' to define our common ideal. To both students and teachers, this ideal is often presented as a challenge to put our lives into perspective. And for both groups, the opportunity arises within the framework of a school, where you combine traditional school structures and homeliness. On this foundation, the folk high school's task can be coined as teachers and students learning and developing within a boarding school community.

Putting this task into praxis is especially difficult for the teacher, who must balance acting as a figure of authority with being an equal. How do you draw ethical and moral

lines for other adults? How do you remain empowered as a teacher while simultaneously allocating influence back to adult, mature students? And how do we even teach adult people anything about our life as social beings, which we must presume our students know as much about as ourselves?

In the following I will present and discuss a key to the development of this complex community, which the folk high school's ideological founder, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) coined poetically as 'living interaction'.

Everyday conversation

I'll start with a story about my daughter, which occasioned a 'living interaction' between my students and myself.

When my daughter was 12 she decided to start her inevitable process of separation from me and the rest of our family. From one day to the other, my sweet little girl started arranging weekly sleepovers with her friends, and when she

occasionally turned up at home she isolated herself in her room with tea, an iPad, and heaps of dirty clothes. As a father, I was slightly frustrated and doubtful as to how to handle her. Should I do the dad-thing and order her to clean up her room and respect the house rules, or should I let adolescence take its course and accept that she spent her hours and days in her youth club or at her friends'?

I ended up discussing the matter with a bunch of folk high school students while cooking together for a larger event. And while we were in the kitchen dicing lettuce and peeling potatoes, I told them of my dilemmas and doubts. The students asked further questions about the situation and chipped in with experiences and opinions. Many of the girls had been in similar situations some five years earlier in their lives and reminded me that I should let my daughter go rather than trying to hang on to her. They told stories about how their parents had given them freedom to experience adult life with boyfriends, parties, and alcohol, and they made me realize that parents are not in opposition to this even if they have a different view of life. Love between parents and their children is about gradually letting go and letting the children live and form their own lives and with that approach maintain an open dialogue with them about the opportunities and limits.

Change of perspective

Especially the girls' experiences helped me to nuance my own view of myself as a father with an adolescent daughter. Students at folk high schools are young adults usually around 20 years old, and therefore in a new phase of their lives where youth and adulthood are major components. They are in a

unique way both in the middle of and at a distance from their youth. So in other words, my students gave me a special view into the world of youths by way of their own current life situation. They challenged my view and offered me a change of perspective in a situation where I could reflect on my role as a father without acting as a father.

In the middle of this conversation, my daughter suddenly calls and asks if she can stay the night at a friend's house and not come home until late afternoon the following day. She couldn't have called at a more appropriate time. The call was an invasion from the real world outside the school, a reality-check, and my students listened intensely to the conversation. I decided not to seek to be alone since my private family situation had already become an object of analysis between me and my students. And so the students were all able to nod in unison when my daughter and I got to the point in the conversation where I had to decide if I would allow her the sleepover or not. I allowed it of course, following my students' advice. And moreover, when my daughter left our house that afternoon, sleeping bag and toothbrush in hand, I slipped her a little money for candy. Another piece of advice from my students, purely against my will, but as a small experiment from the wondrous laboratory of conversation.

Transgressing the professional

In general, my personal family issues have nothing to do with folk high school teaching. Many teaching professionals would actually maintain that teaching can only exist when a professional teacher steps out of his or her private sphere into the world of the subject. In this perspective, the story above was an

example of a misguided school culture.

Nevertheless, as a folk high school teacher I have for some years cultivated a praxis where the goal is not to separate the personal and the professional spheres, but to nurture the exact opposite. My goal is to constantly set the framework for a common investigation of the relationship between me as a person and me as a teacher, between the students' individual lives and the mutual sphere created while teaching my subjects. Or as Grundtvig coined it, to establish a foundation for a living interaction between what is near and what is remote, and what is concrete and what is abstract.

Talking about my daughter does not constitute folk high school teaching. But it is an example of how a conversation about ordinary life's challenges can form a foundation for deep, meaningful conversations. The conversation is an obvious point of departure for discussing grand existential matters like freedom, power, protectiveness, and independence, or for e.g. introducing biblical texts about family life's universal problems, the historical development of patriarchy, or a long discussion of the paradoxes of love.

Quite often, my students are not automatically interested in existentialist, philosophical, or political matters. But when we together move into the zone where we can trace the connections between the near 'lived' world and the world of the classes and subjects, a new interest for the subjects emerges, since the connections between the separate worlds are in themselves motivating or 'engaging', as we like to call it in the world of Danish folk high schools, since this concept stresses the act of actively making connections.

Meet as equals

'Living interaction' has excellent conditions to thrive at folk high schools, since oral communication and dialogue is part of our tradition and pedagogical praxis. Situations like the one described above, are very common at folk high schools, when teacher and students spend time together doing everyday chores and use them to stimulate meaningful conversations. When we work, party and sing together, tell each other stories, and express our doubts and hesitations, we get this crucial levelling of the student-teacher relationship. When the conversation is rooted in our common experiences and lives, we meet as equals. This relationship does not replace the hierarchy between teachers and students, which ought to exist in order to guarantee a functioning school framework. But at a folk high school, it is essential that both students and teachers grow comfortable with this fluctuating hierarchy. One moment, the teacher has a friendly, almost family-like relationship with the students, where the teacher learns from them and submits to the great argumentations of life. And the next moment, the teacher suddenly transforms into a professional authority teaching, correcting, and setting boundaries.

We must discuss life

Grundtvig's 150 year-old concept of living interaction is still alive and relevant in most pedagogical environments, because it challenges the way we perceive the teacher, the students, and the relationship they enter into.

Living interaction reminds us of this dimension by insisting that, even if the conversation takes place outside the walls of the school, it has a very real potential for generating

knowledge and impact the participants. In Grundtvig's notion, words have the power to create our world. And, in effect, living interaction is thus expanded from being a didactical principle about equal, eye-level conversation to also encompassing a mutual form of life sustained and developed by conversation. We must discuss life in order to create and recreate life. Consequently, living interaction also assumes a historical poetical function, establishing ties between people across generations. In this context 'poesis' means 'creation', a pedagogical project integrating the art of taking action. At folk high schools focusing on physical subjects, they don't just practice sports to get better, but to spread a joy of being physically active in society as such. And at other folk high schools, they don't just talk about sustainability, but they grow vegetables and build houses from recycled materials.

Something at stake

According to Grundtvig, for living interaction to take place we need a special dynamic environment of freedom, naturalness, and life. For the modern teacher and student this translates into that something needs to be at stake, a real element of something which is made relevant, and that we can act as freely as possible in relation to the issue.

The cooking situation with its talk about the dilemmas of puberty is a small but very common example of how pedagogical praxis at folk high schools unfolds in the relation between teachers and students. The special thing about the situation is that the didactic and pedagogical dimensions arise as a result of something paradoxical and ironic. It seems to be a paradox, that teaching takes place outside the conventional teaching space, and it seems ironic

that the teacher asks the students for guidance.

If you want living interaction to work as a pedagogical and didactic means for commitment and motivation, you must take the paradox and the irony seriously. You must work together to break and reestablish several boundaries. Teachers and students must be courageous enough to dare approach the taboo, seek the risk and put themselves, their views, knowledge, and experience at stake. When you do this, your conversation partner gets a real opportunity to indulge in a subject, whose purpose can be observed directly and which can open up for greater perspectives. This is the major pedagogical opportunity of living interaction.

ABOUT THE TEXT

This practitioner's note is written for The Association of Folk High Schools in Denmark in 2017. Simon Finnerup teaches *Citizenship, Literature, Religion, Motion Picture and Pedagogics* to both Danish and international students at the Academy of Physical Education - a folk high school in Ollerup, Denmark. In this text he discusses the concept of 'living interaction' in student-teacher relations, originally introduced by Grundtvig, not only as a didactical principle about equal dialogue, but also as a mutual way of life sustained and developed by conversation between teacher and student at informal education institutions.

