Hermeneutic Approach and Virtual Study Environment

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the issue of understanding as thematic understanding. Understanding in the pedagogical activity is not to be taken for granted, it implies understanding both on the part of the teacher and the student, as well as understanding the subject matter itself. The paper is divided into the following parts: Hermeneutic tradition of outlining the explication and its prerequisites. Understanding as a theoretical “intellegere”. “Intellegere” in a virtual study environment. Mistakes in interpretation and barriers to understanding. Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics and framing e-learning courses. Furthermore, the article is concerned with life in the period of socio-cultural changes, which are very much co-shaped by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Their massive impact is connected with positive use of e-Learning, on one hand, but on the other hand, with more doubts about the meaningful direction of human activities. The problems of ICT use as one of the optional topics of essays and reflections were discussed by the students of the Pedagogical Faculty of Charles University at their studies of humanities disciplines (especially philosophy of man, philosophy of language and hermeneutic ethics.

Keywords: hermeneutics; virtual study environment; communication; understanding.

1. Introduction

Contemporary French philosopher Paul Virilio (the founder of dromology, dromos – a race) says that society is structured on the grounds of its relation to motion and speed, and states that production of speed is perceived as a sign of efficiency and success. Capability and skill in using new technologies are becoming more and more important in acquiring this speed. He thinks, though, that “permanent mobilization” of both the public and the private spaces brings the loss of authenticity and blockage of communication rather than the anticipated communication potential. He also criticises the use of new technologies and media forms in educational procedures. This paper attempts to show that virtual study environment, when adequately used, helps to develop the potential of communication. It is, however, necessary to accept prerequisites and bases of communication which emphasizes openness to questioning as the basis of human experience. If we want to understand the others, we have to understand what they want to ask about. This motif can be come across in hermeneutic philosophy.

2. Hermeneutic approach

Hermeneutics (from Greek hermeneutiké, derived from hermenein – to clear, explain, interpret, translate, construe), which originally meant the art of text explanation, gradually became one of the methods of cognition, and a specific philosophical concept. It is based on the fact that cognition refers to open and reflected understanding; its

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essential part being feedback mechanisms, clarifying the common grounds for communication as the prerequisite of cognition, and its essential feature being infiniteness. New and new findings are being presented, making continuous updating in the pedagogical process necessary. This updating is very well implementable in virtual study environment, which does not present the subject matter, the topic to be handled, only with the methods of explanation and description. Hermeneutic approach, emphasizing the necessity to step over the boundaries of verbal explanation (both spoken and written), finds in virtual study environment such a bearer of cognition, which enables us to reconstruct possible questions, and which also makes it possible to formulate and ask arising questions right away. Virtual study environment provides us with tools which help us capture relating connections in different dimensions. Partial pieces of knowledge can be understood from the whole of connections which the course author proceeds from, and which he or she expresses as the objectives he / she wants to achieve with regard to him- / herself as a teacher, with regard to the student, and to the subject matter. Reflection on the topic, explicit formulation of its meaning with regard to required competences on the part of the student, and self-reflection on one’s own disposition to communicate the topic, as well as reflection on different levels of the subject matter, are all essential prerequisites of the teacher’s preparation. At the same time it is necessary to define entry requirements for students, and think of solutions for the situations when these requirements are not met. By incorporating pictures, diagrams, tables, charts and animations which cover entry knowledge and skills in a teaching supplement, the teacher can compensate for insufficient readiness of some of the students, to help them understand the current topic. At this phase of preparation, hermeneutically approached, it is necessary to think of questions, which can possibly be asked about the topic, and maybe also to think of what questions are answered in the exposition part, and what makes exposition important.

Virtual study environment thus becomes a communicative community of pupils, students and teachers, in which the space for questions and attempts at answering these questions, although at different level of adequacy, is always open. Communication occurs here not only on the basis of logical-analytical procedures, i.e. only as digital communication, but also as whole, analogical communication, based on similarity and striving to capture the context of cognitive, emotional and value dimensions. In the Virtual study environment the following values are clearly promoted (see Fig. 1).

**Figure 1. Basic values in essential education: Integrity and authenticity, on the basis of understanding (Semradova et al. 2010: 22)**

### 3. Understanding

Understanding was earlier perceived only as theoretical “intellegere”, which referred to rational, conceptual and categorial grasping of a meaningful fact. This epistemological point of view, however, is not the only one. Another approach focuses on the analysis of the statement “to understand one’s matter”, which results in the concept of a
skill, an ability to handle the matter, i.e. understanding not only as a way of cognition, but rather as “knowing one’s way”, orientation in perspectives, orientation in possibilities and in scheduling one’s activities in connection with understanding. This concerns both the teacher and the student, and their ability to speak a common language and to arrive, through their encounters in the teaching process (such encounters can be even more intensive in virtual study environment, with regard to individualized progress rate and openness of questioning), at adequate capture of what is essential.

“If we cannot understand a text, it is because it does not tell us anything or it has nothing to tell us. Therefore, we cannot be surprised or wonder at the fact that understanding varies from era to era, from man to man. Understanding, motivated by its current questions, is not only reproductive behavior, but always also – as it implies application – productive behavior.” (Grondin 1997: 139). Virtual study environment always shows the productive part of application, understanding being the matter of entering structures and contents, and the matter of better and better control over its tools.

4. Mistakes in interpretation and barriers to understanding

Different starting points and presumptions result in interpretation mistakes and barriers to understanding. With regard to this we can formulate the following basic problems:

- mistakes in interpretation resulting from the thinking mode of both the teacher and the student (deformation as a result of black-and-white, fragmented, conservative, conventional, dogmatic, narrowly specialized, etc. thinking);
- resulting from the way of language expression (use of incomprehensible expressions, complicated sentences – leading to incommunicative ciphers);
- from insufficient previous preparation of both the teacher and the student;
- from unclearly stated objectives of learning and teaching;
- from the lack of inventiveness in creating and using study materials, both the core and additional ones;
- reluctance and unwillingness to make an effort to understand;
- lack of time;
- excess ballast activities;
- everyone’s different priorities;
- antinomies and dilemmas resulting from the necessity to provide a complete specialist message, yet didactically appropriate.

We could certainly make this list even longer. Let us just have a look at some of the authentic replies of students who reflected upon this issue in their hermeneutic seminar:

“We do not look for what we have in common, but what divides us.”
“We are afraid to change our own opinions.”
“We do not see the point, we do not enjoy it, we are bored, we are tired.”
“We do not want to get involved.”
“To understand the explanation we have to sacrifice something, we have to make an effort.”
“It results from unwillingness to accept otherness.”
“There are some turgid EGOs that I do not want to understand!”
“We a priori adopt negativistic attitudes.”
“We lack the ability, we are lazy, idle.”

In the period of 2005 – 2011 we analyzed 216 student essays, making them subject to frequency analysis of occurrence of significant comments. Fig. 2 presents initiatives for development of contemporary education, following the use of ICT. They have axiological and ethical relevance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive evaluation</th>
<th>Negative evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equality of participants in the communication, overcoming barriers to understanding (49)</td>
<td>Many problems arising from the lack of feedback (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A large amount of information, opinions, different</td>
<td>Digital divide, digital gap (28)</td>
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</tbody>
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interpretations; interpretations can contribute to
shaping personal views and attitudes with regard to
others, clarifying misunderstandings, but on condition
that we are able to focus large amounts of information
and misinformation – it helps us to make decisions (28)

It facilitates work with texts (28)
It helps to extend the terms – it enables better
interpretation => hermeneutic ethics may be expanded,
specified, improved (26)
Diffusion of knowledge, inspiration and ideas from
hermeneutic ethics (18)
Research results published in hermeneutic ethics (9)
It affects various possibilities of communication noise

Figure 2. The impact of the use of ICT on hermeneutic ethics

If we are to have a close look at what specific problems arise when using virtual study environment, then above all we have to mention that it is more demanding on handling available tools than classical methods of exposition are. Very often it is a matter of ICT “phobia”. We also come across “dromological” attitude that dehumanized communication does not develop us in a positive way, but integrates us more and more into the field of performance, more and more demanding tasks, leaving us with no time for res humanea, always in a hurry, catching, competing, filling time units more and more with activities. Performance is increasing, but feeling of satisfaction and happiness does not come proportionately to our efforts and performance.

5. Conclusion

The use of Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics is a major contribution to devising e-learning courses in which we would be able to overcome the above mentioned specific barriers related to the use of ICT in education process, and interconnect knowledge management with e-learning. This philosophy requires sharing questions and replies from both students and teachers. It is based on the primary position of the question and answer logic, where understanding is perceived as participation, participation in meaning, as sharing what, why and how it takes place in virtual study environment, how it relates to me, what it means to me, what it enables me to do, what competences I require, what I can achieve.

“We gain real experience when realizing that the way other people understand our statements or our acts, does not necessarily result from what we wanted to say through those sentences or acts. Thus, the meaning is nothing to be possessed or controlled... Meaning is not a completed entity,” (Pinc 1999: 50). Meaning is nothing predetermined, we, as teachers participate in creating it together with our students. There are great possibilities for participation in virtual study environment, it is a chance for everyone who does not want to stick to reproduction, but prefers to be productive, creative, and who wants to apply what he or she has learned.

References

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