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FACTORS IMPACTING THE IMPROVEMENT OF HERMENEUTIC COMPETENCES DURING ACADEMIC EDUCATION PREPARING FOR SOCIAL PROFESSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The problem presented in this paper is a very prevailing issue, due to many interrelated factors (social, pedagogical, methodological), therefore we have considered it worthwhile to undertake the analysis. The concept of hermeneutical competences in Polish literature has not yet been the subject of special research, while their essence manifests itself in comprehending, reading and creating oneself and the world as meaningful, constituted by the senses of the whole and is brought to the understanding of exceptional situations and people, as well as the skillful application of general knowledge in specific circumstances (Milerski, 2011). They can also be de-

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scribed as “exploratory behaviors (capturing or establishing meanings); genre-specific comprehension of the environment; the ability to establish a dialogue, understand, cooperate, and thus activities that H.-G. Gadamer collectively described as «hermeneutical approach»” (Urbaniak, 2017, p. 24).

The acquisition and improvement of hermeneutical competences is supported by the academic research in action, which seems to be an urgent necessity in a situation of bureaucratic requirements quickly increasing in terms of standardization of goals, effects and procedures for their achievement and even evaluation, when at the same time the world is undergoing constant changes and the professional fate of the undergraduates is uncertain (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2001, 2014). It is understandable that results need to be compared, but equally regrettable that the dynamics of knowledge itself, its vibrating categories, or even the interest of students are not taken into account. As there are fewer and fewer hours available for subjects of the curriculum, and as they are being fragmented, there is also less time to contemplate dilemmas and doubts, to combine knowledge acquired in individual modules, for the personalization of the teacher and student contact. Moreover, only a few competencies, including social ones, perceived in a quite narrow sense, are noted among the entire plethora of these capabilities. For this reason, efforts should be made to exploit the remaining gaps in emancipation and freedom, to try to improve students’ hermeneutical competences under the requirements of the curriculum and with time available, which would make it possible to see the structural complexity of phenomena, the multi-faceted world and human situations, and to thoughtfully change and expand the academic teacher’s own methodological skills, make better use of the time of contact with students and to inspire their self-education and work experience.

THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTALS OF HERMENEUTICAL COMPETENCES

The first lesson of our research continued for quite a long time, it was a survey of the reference literature to be collected, analysis and interpretation of its contents as well as conclusions, generalizations, and postulates concerning the current knowledge on hermeneutical competences.

The idea of our research was based on the humanistic paradigm of academic teaching, although it was rather targeted towards philosophy than psychology, which is at present a trend dominating in the publications of this scope (Sajdak, 2013, pp. 344-346). The author draws attention to misunderstandings associated with the use of the term “humanistic paradigm” and also points to its philosophical sources (Sajdak, 2013, pp. 346-351), however in practice philosophy is marginalized in the area of didactics. For that reason, we also mention references on hermeneutical pedagogy and pedagogical hermeneutics (Sawicki, 1996; Ablewicz, 1994; Mikoś, 2008). We found

an important inspiration and theoretical assistance in the publications tackling the subject of religion pedagogy (Milerski, 2011, 2015; Chrost, 1997), as they provided justifications for humanistic approaches in didactics as well as their exemplifications. The paradigm of duality and the idea of the breakthrough of duality in pedagogy was also found to be a great foundation to rely on (Witkowski, 1994, 2013, 2015; Kaliszewska, 2015), as it was combined with a detailed hermeneutical competence to perceive and respect duality in life as well as professional work, the characteristics of which were also included in the description of hermeneutical competences in German reference literature (Schwarz, 2008; Zimmermann, 2005). Another group of references included publications related to the competences of educators (Szempruch, 2011; Koć-Seniuch, 2008; Madalińska-Michalak, Góralaska, 2012) and new professionalism (Kwiatkowska, 1997, 2008; Drózka, 1997, 2008; Gołębiak, 1998; Gołębiak, Zamorska, 2014; Mizerek, 1999), which is exceedingly strong, as it has been enlightened by hermeneutics (Dewe et al., 2001; Oevermann, 2016) and, publications directly relating to hermeneutical competences, although only a few of the latter were collected (Urbaniak, 2017; Piecychna, 2014, Bukowski, 2012). These central issues, therefore, had to be integrated overadditively, vertically and horizontally, and thus in a systemic way (Duraj-Nowakowa, 2006), in order to respond to the question to what hermeneutical competences are, what determinants impact them and how to develop their sources, acquired and formulated from the day of birth, determined by human nature, culture and education (Klasińska, 2018; Urbaniak, 2017).

In the light of the literature studies, we may assume that each time the set of components comprising hermeneutical competences may be different, depending on the specifics of the selected profession, preferences, interests and abilities of individual students and academic teachers (cf. Kaliszewska, Klasińska, 2018). The description of hermeneutical competences for the sake of pedagogy and social work corresponds to the belief that it may also serve other social professions:

“The hermeneutical competence of a student, a future employee in social professions, is a system of knowledge, skills, psychological, mental and acting abilities and aptitudes, as well as attitudes that enable him/her to:

1. an independent and active study of a selected academic field through purposeful, spontaneous and active (i.e. active listening, noting, producing oral statements) participation in classes, reading with comprehension, analyzing (also critical) and interpreting cultural texts (including specialist ones), understanding symbolic messages and the world of values; empathic listening; independently creating shorter or longer pieces of writing, experiencing reflectiveness, conscious, successive building and expanding of one's own professional and scientific skills;
2. hermeneutical comprehension of the social meaning and specific needs of the selected social profession, including the identification of the origins of the profession and its historical, cultural and social background and con-

texts, aspects of uncertainty, duality, ambivalence, values and anti-values, links between theory and practice, needs and conditions in working with others and their families as well as the social environment;

3. ability to make decisions and act/operate as well as take responsibility for decisions made, although there may have been inconsistencies between theory and practice, although there is a possibility of uncertainty and duality in the contact with another person: student, ward, client, their world of values, language and communication competencies; ability to experience empathy, conduct dialogue, respect the need for distance or closeness in mutual contacts; ability to reflect in action and beyond action, to make changes in oneself and verify one's own behavior, to improve one's practice based on the system of a hermeneutic circle" (Kaliszewska, Klasińska, 2018, p. 329).

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RESEARCH IN ACTION ON THE DETERMINANTS OF HERMENEUTICAL COMPETENCES

The currently revitalized action paradigm poses an opportunity for academic didactics, as research in action, which it is expressed by, may be both a tool for learning and improving this research procedure as part of university education, as well as a factor of personal development for academic teachers (as a method of evaluation of their own experience) for improving methodical and methodological aspects of their profession. Difficulties and restraints are linked to the uncertainty of requirements and evaluation criteria for researchers (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2001, 2014; Červinková, Gołębniak, 2010, 2013).

The research in action that we present here was pursued in the course of an optional class, supporting the education of social work students, *Cognitive competencies in the learning process* in the academic year of 2017/2018 and lasted twenty hours of teaching.

The research procedure allowed for the following objectives to be formulated: 1) identify and define the determinants impacting the acquisition and improvement of hermeneutical competences 2) contribute to the personal development of academic staff (as a method of evaluating their own experience). Regard was paid to the processes of comprehension, recognition, and naming of duality, interpretation of a text, intersemiotic translation of words into art symbols, as these competencies are underestimated and neglected in the academic experience.

It was adopted that under the curriculum in the current conditions there is a possibility to improve hermeneutical competences of students of social work. However, the learning process is quite a comprehensive concept for us. Learning does not only occur during classes of the university curriculum but also in the course of the

self-education process, internship, voluntary work, professional work and other activities providing knowledge, and/or experience and expanding the view of the world.

Therefore, depending on the subject, the time of classes was varied. Some issues expanded well over 45 minutes, others merely took 20 minutes, especially if they seemed too difficult and distant to the students, e.g. drama scenes to be improvised, to which the students were initially reluctant and then they liked it; or drawing an interpretation of the poetic text. In the first version of the course sheet, program, we have used a typical differential evaluation, which turned out to have been selected improperly. It is not possible to always use differentiating evaluation to assess certain forms of activity, e.g. the interpretation of texts. Thus, we have employed a formative evaluation, based on dialogue and feedback (Sterna, 2016).

In the course of the research, as the participants of the study, we were able to apply self-criticism and verify the duration of individual modules of the classes on an ongoing basis, as well as make notes necessary to describe the situation of an academic teacher, their reflections and self-assessment. As the number of students was small, it was impossible to predict in advance how much time particular topics will take, which exercises will last a long time and which will simply be “brushed off” by students. Observation has become a source of information about the level of difficulty or attractiveness of particular tasks and exercises, the pace of students’ work, their motivation and interest in the presented topics.

The work produced by students, such as written statements, illustrations, scenes, buildings made of blocks have become the source of information and interpretation of hermeneutical competences (J.M. Spychała method of “Lego-Logos”). In addition, an evaluation survey. It is important and interesting that during the research, in the still imperfect practice of recognizing and improving hermeneutical competences in students, it has already become possible to distinguish 1) the natural stage (relying on natural dispositions and motivation to learn), the awareness of competences originated at home (e.g. empathy, routine reading); 2) the stage of conscious striving to improve hermeneutical competencies; 3) the stage of recognition of hermeneutical competencies that are most useful during university studies; 4) acquisition of professionally oriented hermeneutical competences, facilitated by conversations and observations.

DETERMINANTS IMPACTING THE ACQUISITION OF HERMENEUTICAL COMPETENCES

Biological and cultural roots, innate and unchangeable, as well as the acquired and developmental character of competencies impact their profiling, so both the environment and the characteristics of each individual are sources of their experience (Marrowska, 2012; Urbaniak, 2017; Klasińska, 2018). Research in action was applied mainly to learn about the determinants occurring in the university environment. And

here, above all, the difficulty for the teacher was the uncertainty that accompanied the new situation of teaching a new class and, at the same time, pursuing research. Lack of ability to cope with stress is, therefore, a factor that can impede teaching of the classes properly. In this case, the determinant was overcome. For the first time, there was also the opportunity to use a number of deliberately prepared didactic measures, which aroused curiosity among academic teachers about the possible effects of their work. This factor, in turn, had a motivating effect.

Some difficulties also appeared in teacher – student relations. Academic staff must be impervious to temporary setbacks and carefully prepare for classes in order to use their time effectively. That is why every student's behavior was perceived with a pinch of salt, especially when students showed no interest, little activity or presented they lack writing or visual skills. However, it was possible to carry out the planned classes and convince the students to have a debate. In the teacher's opinion, they recognized what hermeneutical competencies are and what is their significance in the further stages of their studies. They were interested in the methods of work suggested during classes, performed a series of decent artworks, and were also eager to create buildings made of blocks as interpretations of philosophical texts. They role-played meetings of Heracles with women, although they did encounter some difficulties in improvising dialogues (Spychała, 2018). Therefore the teacher's communication skills become significant as they are creating a good atmosphere of classes conducive to arousing students' interest in new issues and achieving the planned goals. Motivating students is best by own example: passions, problems, questions to answer together, sharing doubts.

Students must also feel secure and establish a relationship with the academic teacher, allowing them to express their own views without fear. We are dealing here with synergetic cooperation resulting in positive effects of the classes, understanding the meaning of hermeneutical competence and interest for self-education in this field. They are also responsible for resources of natural skills and abilities, personal culture, empathy, self-confidence, the ability to cooperate and overcome obstacles, changing own features learned at home, motivation to learn and life goals, as well as the state of health and socio-economic circumstances.

Moreover, the preparation of students for the analysis of poetic works, paintings, as well as their reading experience, acquired in earlier school years, proved to be an important determinant for the course of the classes. People who do not read books on a regular basis clearly have difficulties in expressing their own thoughts in an unconventional way, they are afraid to go "out of the box."

Properly arranged classroom with equipment, which facilitates group work, comfortable writing and drawing as well as allows for changing the location of tables is another factor impacting cooperation during classes. Email communication with the students was an important aspect as well, so that texts, worksheets, and information could easily be transferred.

More determinants include access to the pre-planned literature and texts to be used in the class and dynamic responses to the emerging difficulties or creative impulses from the students.

Action research has then enabled us to confirm the usefulness of the selected methods of working with students and the appeal of the suggested topics of classes. As suggested by the students, we also ascertained that only a few appealing, but well-known methods or tools are enough to motivate students to be active. An excessive number of suggestions and little known techniques are perceived as a threat and excessive difficulty to overcome.

A very important determinant in the future will consist of preparing the operationalization of objectives as well as forms of evaluation and assessment of students' achievements. It was not possible to develop this aspect based purely on theoretical premises without first verifying organizational and methodical details. Moreover, we should also relate to external conditions, i.e. legal, ministerial and organizational actions under the university, so that, among the demonstrated competences, apart from the social and communication ones, which are a part of the curriculum, we see the introduction of the wide range of hermeneutical competences.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature gathered during several years of literature collection argues that humanistic aspects in education and professional work are increasingly being taken into account in the process of academic education in social professions (Witkowski, 1994, 2013, 2018; Marynowicz-Hetka, 2006, 2011). In this case, the quality of vocational skills is the result of this existential transformation, which is a phenomenon occurring as a result of didactic actions aimed at it. We understand that education, the aims, and contents of which include hermeneutic competences in a broad sense, may in effect cause this transformation, resulting in not only technically professional but also an empathetic and understanding presence of caregivers, teachers, educators, creating relations providing developmental impulses to students, pupils, and undergraduates.

The didactic methods applied in our research, each of which was only used once, actually to a more illustrative purpose, showing the possibilities of improving hermeneutical competencies (these were: text analysis, text interpretation with the use of blocks, photographic interpretation, intersemiotic translation of text into image) than to the maximum extent, require further use, further attempts of use, in order to practice them to more profound extents, posing difficulties for the users, mobilizing to think and create new ideas. Therefore this may be the reason to abandon the multitude of forms during classes in favor of one or two, e.g. in favor of college, which will appeal to students as a language of expression and as a medium supporting their education (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2016, p. 202; Jaworska-Witkowska, Rzekońska, 2008).

On the other hand, we can already indicate in light of the research that there are some premises for further practice of improving hermeneutical competencies. First of all, it seems, that philosophizing (including discussion and dialogue), which already has a certain tradition in Polish education, should be encouraged more often and used more effectively in education at all levels as well as the university. Children and adolescents prepared to freely express their own thoughts and reveal their dilemmas already in primary school will also respond to information in a multitude of ways during their university studies. This will help them open to the world, let them think in a multifaceted way about the existing options of living a life, and not fear an additional burden as some of the contemporary students deem the open and ambiguous knowledge. Another obstacle consists of a belief of many practitioners about the harmfulness of such philosophical inquiries by non-philosophers, which undermine the authority, tradition, and clarity of the content. And yet these ambivalences in life are a part of our existence and the need to make uncertain choices – the tragedy of human fate, as Bohdan Suchodolski has already pointed out.

Thus, relating to the interests presented by the students we can and should expand the curriculum and methodology of work by forms they select, e.g. encounters with photography or illustration, decoding of advertisements, analyzing selected themed photographs taken by the students themselves, or performing collages inspired by situations themes or slogans. We ought to ensure that artistic expression becomes the common code of the group.

After briefly mentioning the deliberations carried out in this paper and the results of our research, it should be pointed out that the conditions for the improvement of hermeneutical competences are progressive, they do not depend only on planned and predictable aspects, but at any point and in any circumstances it is possible to improve these competencies and motivate students to pursue inner development.

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FACTORS IMPACTING THE IMPROVEMENT OF HERMENEUTIC COMPETENCES DURING ACADEMIC EDUCATION PREPARING FOR SOCIAL PROFESSIONS

Keywords: hermeneutical competences, academic teaching, action research

Abstract: The text presents several perspectives of approach to the improvement of hermeneutical competences of students educated for social professions such as pedagogy and social work. Initially we have determined what the essence of these competences and its factors are, and next we described the assumptions of the research procedure of the undertaken studies in action and its results concerning the factors impacting the improvement of hermeneutical competences. Finally, postulates as to the possibility of pursuing further tasks under the compulsory curriculum were formulated.

CZYNNIKI DOSKONALENIA KOMPETENCJI HERMENEUTYCZNYCH W TRAKCIE AKADEMICKIEGO KSZTAŁCENIA PRZYGOTOWUJĄCEGO DO PROFESJI SPOŁECZNYCH

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje hermeneutyczne, dydaktyka akademicka, badania w działaniu

Streszczenie: W tekście w kilku odsłonach został zaprezentowany zamysł doskonalenia kompetencji hermeneutycznych studentów kształconych do wybranych profesji społecznych (pedagogika, praca socjalna). Najpierw dokonano ustaleń odnoszących się do istoty tych kompetencji oraz ich uwarunkowań, następnie opisano założenia procedury badawczej podjętych badań w działaniu oraz jej wyniki dotyczące czynników doskonalenia kompetencji hermeneutycznych. Wreszcie sformułowano postulaty odnoszące się do możliwości podejmowania dalszych zadań w ramach zajęć obowiązkowych.