

On the necessity of the 'Gegen'-Stand

Dorothea Weise

Jumping over one's own shadow and expanding boundaries are frequent demands in the field of music and movement through the special methodological possibilities of eurhythmics. This is true for the learners as well as for the teachers. With a view to the concept of perception of constructivism, it is first clarified why perceptions are always individual and bound to subjective experiences. Then the 'Gegen-Stand' comes into play as a surface of friction and a basis for an active and reflective engagement that is capable of producing new results.

On the necessity of the ‘Gegen-Stand’¹

Dorothea Weise

In the field of eurhythmics, the concept of fostering creativity is at the top of the list of objectives due to the high proportion of activities involving experimentation, exploration, improvisation and composition. The notion that creativity is reserved only for geniuses endowed with special powers has long been outdated. Everybody has creative potential and we all need it to come to terms with reality by merging our fantasies, needs, expectations and experiences into subjectively meaningful units in interplay with our perception of the environment.² This everyday achievement is poles apart from the development of an artistic production with strong symbolic power and many forms of creativity lie in between.³ The bubbling up of ideas in free play with a material, the novel combination or application of familiar patterns in an unusual context, the discovery of intuitive sources in improvisation - the list could be easily continued – are moments that not just happen when planned by the teacher. They can occur at all times and with almost any tasks that allows a certain openness to its processing, because the subjective experience of the participants leads to individual experiences, challenges and solutions. In open-minded groups this is a desired outcome and often enriches all participants’ experience, including the teacher.

So how can these multiple processes be included in the planning, how can they be considered, recognised and reflected in the teaching process? It is hardly possible, and perhaps not even

¹ In German, the word ‘Gegenstand’ is versatile and can translate as *thing, article, object, subject, matter* or *purpose*. When adding a hyphen, it reveals the two words it is made up of: *Gegen* (*against, counter*) and *Stand* (*position, state*). The word creation *Gegen-Stand* therefore signifies something that counters an existing position or goes against the established state of things. Rather than the word “Widerstand” (*resistance*), it implies the materiality of the object that does the countering. The English *counteract* comes close to the original but this in turn carries a somewhat hostile notion which *Gegen-Stand* does not possess.

² G. Ammon: *Gruppendynamik der Kreativität*, München 1974

³ cf. summary H. Hirmke-Toth in chapter „Kreativität in der Rhythmik“ in: Hauser-Dellefant/Witoszynskyj (Ed.): *Leben ist Bewegung ist Musik*, Wiesbaden 2017 (pp. 46)

necessary, to trace every single experiential process in detail. However, if the teaching aims to be promoting creativity, a look at the assumptions of constructivism can contribute interesting aspects to the planning, observation and reflection of teaching settings. Constructivism is a central figure of thought in various approaches in 20th century philosophy which assumes that a perceived object is constructed by the perceiver him/herself through the process of perceiving.

Perception

The impossibility of separating the act of perception and the objects of perception from each other is a fascinating basic problem in theories of cognition, which already occupied Plato. Here the world of things, there the perceiver who, thanks to his/her sensory activities, develops a construct that s/he will never be able to compare with the "objective" object, since this would also require a perceptual activity that could only grasp certain aspects of the object. Consequently, we can never take in the WHAT, but only the HOW of the external (and even more so of our internal) world. In view of the resulting infinite variety of interpretations of what we perceive, it seems astonishing that we are able to communicate at all and to bring our individual constructions into connection and exchange with each other.

Two convictions about how to grasp this vagueness are of particular interest in the context of creativity. To put it very simply, from a science point of view the task is to understand the given structures of the world with reason, thereby to reveal its secrets and to transform them into data, concepts, analyses and tools. Despite all the progress associated with it, systematic investigation and description remain an important instrument for gaining control over our perception, or, more accurate: our experience. It also serves to classify and collectively understand phenomena, meant here in its acceptation as something that shows or reveals itself.

Representatives of constructivism reject the effort to create consistency between experience and "reality" as a prerequisite for this relationship. Our senses do not transmit things to us, but rather characteristics of things, and predominantly of things to which we direct our attention. In a sense, perception follows function. An example: the familiar request to "show what you hear" encourages to increasingly recognise and establish correspondences between musical events and the kinaesthetic sensations produced by "matching" movements. The search for and finding of analogies in transformation processes form an important core content in rhythmic.

However, the translation of auditory impressions into one's own (movement) expression can only reflect a certain spectrum that is given by the teacher (rhythm, melodic course, dynamics, etc.) or chosen by oneself.

The principle of Gegen-Stand

The dancer and psychologist Detlef Kappert describes the search for meaningful confrontation as essential for personal growth and artistic maturation in the context of his reflections on a teaching style that enables performance, sensitivity and artistic development.⁴ This in itself is nothing new. The question is: When can confrontations have a productive effect and at what level do confrontations take place? An overemphasis on performance or excessive demands in improvisation tasks that require technical skill or prior experience are more likely to lead to decreased engagement and dissatisfaction. Insufficiently focused demands create arbitrariness or helplessness. This is where Kappert introduces the term *productive uncertainty*⁵. A combination of words that initially makes the reader stumble, but on closer inspection opens up a space for thinking about the questions posed at the beginning. It means a kind of unsettling that releases productive forces in the confrontation with teaching content and with oneself. The concept of productive uncertainty, unlike the common understanding of creativity as a problem-solving behaviour, indicates the special responsibility of the teacher. By virtue of their competences, they set the framework for technical, aesthetic and personal challenges and look for settings in which the group is offered possibilities to connect with the confrontations in a meaningful and developmental way.

The term confrontation is used here in its meaning as comparison. It illustrates the need to create incentives to deal with the teaching material so that a process of engagement and effort is set in motion. In performance-oriented subjects such as dance, sports or instrumental lessons, the

⁴ D. Kappert: *Tanz zwischen Kunst und Therapie*, Frankfurt 1993 (pp. 11)

⁵ *Ibid.*

incentive is often very far removed from the current level of achievement of the learners and practitioners and addresses personal development mainly in the area of perseverance and discipline. In a rhythmic class that wants to uncover creative potential and shape it aesthetically, confrontations continue to develop as they are happening. They float between aesthetic questions, technical challenges, issues of interaction, self-reflection and aspects of relevance for outsiders. The task of a creative teaching style is to find these Gegen-Stands, address them and to work on them constructively.

A look back at constructivism shows not only the necessity of resistance to gain insights, but also the simple fact that our actions and cognition can only develop through dealing with obstacles. This, too, is in principle not new to all those who are familiar with the term sensorimotorics and have told themselves in personal crises that they will eventually grow from them. However, the consequence that completely different results will develop due to the individual preconditions of the perception process is always worth emphasising. Ernst von Glasersfeld, a representative of radical constructivism, coined the German term "Viabilität" for this purpose, which derives from the English word *viability* and also means suitable, useful, functional.⁶

A practical example may clarify this concept. Half of an adult group listens to a short piece of music, while the other half of the group is outside the room and cannot hear the piece. Then the two groups get together in pairs and those who have heard the piece describe it verbally to their partner as best as they can. What is being described? Instrumentation, form, style, dynamic progression of the piece? Inner images that came up for the listener? Moods into which s/he was transported? Synaesthetic sensations, such as seeing colours, or kinaesthetic sensations articulated in strong gestures and body language?

⁶ E. von Glasersfeld: *Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit und des Begriffs der Objektivität* in: Einführung in den Konstruktivismus, München 2012 (pp. 18)

All these, and possibly more variations, are individually appropriate and useful means of describing the experience. The Gegen-Stand here is not the piece of music, but the task of translating what is perceived into terms that, at best, turn into a musical idea again for the partner. Listening to the piece afterwards may reveal similarities and discrepancies. It shows that perception and the subsequent acts of describing the perceived basically create the auditory object in the first place, and this can already be considered a creative act.⁷

Supporting creative processes

While being conscious of the tension between the diversity of individual perceptions and experiences of all participants and the search for ways to develop strong, individually expressive personalities in music and movement, teachers may first and foremost also see themselves as learners. Learners who perceive outcomes of tasks they have given, which are outside their own spectrum of experience or preconceived solutions, with curiosity. They are prepared to be surprised and catapulted back into a state of open incomprehension - a state they often demand of their groups with improvisational tasks and experimental phases. But by virtue of their professional competence, they are also able to strike a balance between structure and freedom, the familiar and the new, continuity and variance in the way they work on topics. The basis for this are tasks that allow individual solutions.⁸ Depending on the stage of development of the group and the topic, different types of tasks can be used. Some will be briefly introduced here and others can be added:

- Principle of reduction: the freedom of decision is relatively small due to given or pre-prepared material. Examples: Playing one note only, but differently each time; sticking with one movement motif and deciding only when and how often it is performed in

⁷ cf. reference to S. Ceccato, p. 29 in: *ibid.*

⁸ Friederike Lampert proposes an interesting outline for stimulating change in the sense of new adaptations with her model on the relationship between planning and improvisation. F. Lampert: *Tanzimprovisation*, Bielefeld 2007 (pp. 148)

relation to the group activity; finding 20 different movement beginnings from one posture.

- Principle of transformation: Focusing the perception on certain composition features in one medium of expression leads to transfer processes in another medium of expression. Reference form, reaction time, dynamic or degree of association are variants here to further creative processes to avoid stereotyping.
- Principle of imagination: When associative images and identifications unfold their effect, completely new results and sensations can arise.⁹
- Paradoxical tasks: Attempting the impossible is fun when there is an open and experimental mood: dancing Ravel's Bolero on one square metre; stopping a fall at the moment of tipping over; playing a familiar melody on an instrument that one has not learned.

The subsequent talking about a task's outcome should be considered in terms of its function. Especially evidently novel experiences can still be "without language", they are in a kind of pre-conceptual phase. As long as there is no hurry (end of the lesson!) or interrupting correction, the phase of tentative verbalisation can be rich with the fascination of discovery and discovering. The physics educationalist Martin Wagenschein calls this the "venerable state of stammering"¹⁰. Sometimes results don't need to be reviewed. Often it is the group that signals whether there is a need for discussion. Naming and categorising experiences too early can lead to a homogenisation that does not satisfactorily express the specificity of the experience. Nevertheless, verbalisation raises not only the awareness of one's own experiences, but also reveals the other participant's perception, which then have to be classified in relation to the task.

⁹ cf. Prinzipien für die Verwendung von Vorstellungsbildern in: A. Bernard/U. Stricker/W. Steinmüller: Ideokinese – Ein kreativer Weg zu Bewegung und Körperhaltung, Bern 2003 (pp. 58)

¹⁰ M. Wagenschein: Physikunterricht und Sprache. Braunschweig 1962 as cited in: R. Hüttmann: Wege der Vermittlung von Musik, Augsburg 2009 (pp. 85)

A guideline for a creative teaching style can only be derived to a limited extent from the considerations presented. Nevertheless, two conclusions can be drawn:

1. Forget, shed and shake off your own insights and ideas to really look at and listen to what is taking place. Otherwise, experiences become expectations and thus an obstacle to the originality and creative processes of others.
2. Challenge your own viability and put yourself time and again into the magical state of new, possibly first experiences.

This article was originally published in: Berufsverband Rhythmik Schweiz (Ed.):
Fachzeitschrift Rhythmik Schweiz No. 31, 2017

Shortlink to German version: <https://bit.ly/Rhythmik-Fachzeitschrift-Nr-31>