

Pedagogics – on ousted observational learning

by Carl Bossard*



Carl Bossard
(Photo ma)

He was certainly a self-confident artist and knew he was skilled: the sculptor and master builder Erhart Küng (1420–1507). He came to Bern as a stonemason around 1455; soon he was responsible for the new construction of Bern Cathedral.



"machs na" ("do the same") – inscription on a pillar of the Bern Cathedral (image Xxlstier/Wikimedia)

His sculptural group with the "Last Judgement" on the central west portal is still impressive today. And the proud inscription on the buttress near the Schultheissenpforte is probably also his work; it is carved in stone and bears witness, perhaps a little ostentatiously, to his artistic skill: "machs na" ("do the same").¹

Demonstration and imitation as a pedagogical archetype

"Do the same! I've shown it to you – with an ideal image", that is probably Erhart Küng's stone message on the pillar parapet. Demonstrate and imitate. Perhaps the oldest model of pedagogics and probably the simplest as well as the most direct form of instruction and teaching: the ancient Greeks called this method mimetic learning. The Bernese university lecturer and pioneering learning psychologist Hans Aebli considered it to be the second basic form of teaching – after narrating and lecturing.²

"I'll show you; now try it yourself!"

It is not surprising that among the twelve basic forms in Aebli's "General Didactics", demonstrating and imitating is in second place. The meth-

odological imperative "try it yourself" is, putting it more bombastic, one of the basic anthropological and learning-theoretical constants. How does a young person learn to speak? Without the model of human language, this intricate learning process is not possible. Or what unimagined value holds telling fairy tales and reading stories aloud for later reading by oneself! And how does a young child learn to tie his or her shoes? Look, I'll show you; now try it yourself! The child observes how it works and then imitates it – perhaps with some help at first. It keeps trying over and over!

On necessary and systematic demonstration

The same applies to school. In instrumental lessons in music, demonstration is common practice; or in the subject of art and design, for example: here the teacher shows helpful techniques -- and thus opens the door to the world of doing-it-yourself – through the processes of observing, reflecting, problem-solving. The learners' own actions are fundamental. Equally fundamental and necessary, however, is the systematic instruction by a competent teacher.

When it comes to the acquisition of skills and working techniques, demonstration and "showing" first play an eminently important role. In all subjects. The teacher has an impact through his or her capabilities and also by demonstrating and explaining things: in French lessons the formation of certain sounds such as the voiced "s", in English the "th". In the sports lessons by demonstrating a dance step or long jump. The teacher also has an impact when solving a maths problem by verbalising the various steps,

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by eloquently reciting a text passage, by personally picking up the drawing pencil. All this is part of the natural repertoire of methods that are effective for learning.

Demonstrating as didactic minimum

It is therefore astonishing how little value is attached to demonstrating in today's pedagogics and didactics. Demonstrating is teacher-centred and directive, it is argued – and not very creative. The creativity imperative dominates. The child should discover everything by itself – playfully and “from within itself”, they say. Even the alphabet is learned this way in some places, not to mention the writing. As if demonstration, instruction and imitation as the most direct form of automating skills did not exist! Is there a connection here with the lower PISA [OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, editor's note.] results in German language?

How very different the messages of renowned educational researchers sound! The decisive pedagogical skill is the ability to demonstrate, writes the German educational scientist *Klaus Prange*. And he adds: “this is, so to speak, the didactic minimum [...]”³ This sounds plausible, and it makes sense, because the most elementary form of natural pedagogics is demonstration. The American evolutionary biologist *Michael Tomasello* is deeply convinced of this: “you show someone how something is done either by doing it directly or by pantomiming it in

some way. And like communication, the action is not done for its own sake, but for the benefit of the observer or the learner.”⁴

“Do the same” as a necessary corrective

This is perhaps what the stonemason Erhart K ung meant. He was skilled in doing something, and he demonstrated it; “do the same” he proclaimed from the Bern Cathedral in stone letters far out across the country. To this day, this imperative has lost none of its value – not even in school.

“Do the same” is not only an archetypal form of learning; it could be a methodological corrective to today's emphasis on self-directed learning. Recognising that demonstration and imitation is but one very important method, one of many.

Source: <https://www.journal21.ch/artikel/vom-verdraengten-vormachen-und-nachmachen>, 15 January 2022

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ A copy is shown; the original is in the Bernisches Historisches Museum.

² Hans Aebli (2011), *Zwölf Grundformen des Lehrens. Eine Allgemeine Didaktik auf psychologischer Grundlage. Medien und Inhalte didaktischer Kommunikation, der Lernzyklus*. 14th ed. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, p. 65ff.

³ Klaus Prange (2012), *Die Zeigestruktur der Erziehung. Grundriss der Operativen Pädagogik*. 2nd ed. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, p. 78.

⁴ Michael Tomasello (2014), *Eine Naturgeschichte des menschlichen Denkens*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 96

