

How to deal with mistakes – positively

Von Dr. Christa Lohman

Abstract of the talk *Produktiver Umgang mit Fehlern – wie soll das gehen?* given by Annemarie von der Groeben, Deputy Headteacher of the Laborschule, Bielefeld.

The speaker puts the problem of dealing with mistakes in a wider context by covering religious and philosophical questions and establishing a relationship between human behaviour in paradise and teachers' behaviour in class. She distinguishes between fault (being responsible for a bad or unpleasant situation) and mistake (something not done correctly) which leads her to discuss various aspects of mistakes: pedagogic ones and didactic ones – both of them influenced by cultural traditions, current trends and human conditions.

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Faults and mistakes open up a wide field. They can conflict with norms or standards that define what is right or wrong, they can conflict with moral principles and rules that define what is good or bad, or they can conflict with social forms and behaviour that define what is appropriate or inappropriate.

Faults and mistakes in a moral or normative sense can only be made by human beings. They are located in a triangle between the person ("me"), the social environment and general standards. For this reason, dealing with mistakes always is the expression of a relationship. Those who make a mistake can regret it, apologize for it, improve on it or compensate.

Those who judge can either forgive or punish, mark a mistake in red or eliminate it, they can be tolerant or demand repentance. Both sides, those who make mistakes and those who react to making mistakes are partners in a social relationship ruled by common principles.

A mistake is a twofold experience: its positive or negative consequences decide upon the quality of learning. Thus, dealing with mistakes positively might be the focus of a school development process. When Hartmut von Hentig held his inaugural speech at the opening of the Laborschule in Bielefeld, of which he is the founder, he presented the idea of a school which was going to make mistakes since mistakes are learning tools. This principle applies to learners as well as to teachers. They too, the teachers, are learning human beings and they will make mistakes. Von Hentig anticipated what today is meant by *Fehlerfreundlichkeit* or error friendliness.

In the course of her talk Annemarie von der Groeben gives examples of children who learn and children who do not learn. Here are a few of them.

- All children learning to speak make creative and intelligent mistakes that help to advance the language learning process. Otherwise they would have to remain silent as many pupils do because they are afraid of making mistakes. That would be a serious setback for young learners as they would be excluded from the human and language community.



How can we save, the speaker questions, the productive force of the natural language learning process for learning in school, in each subject?

- The process of learning to write new words sets apart two types of learners. There is a lexical approach and a generalizing one, the latter using and transferring rules. The speaker assumes that we too often correct mistakes on the basis of generalizing instead of understanding the learner's strategy.

How can we support pupils, she asks, on their way towards reflective speaking and writing taking their strategy of learning into consideration instead of just looking at the set of rules?

- Referring to various examples of school losers, especially pupils from *Hauptschulen* and/or from migration backgrounds the speaker states: The lack of fundamental learning experience can hardly or only to a lesser degree be compensated by instruction. Schools are supportive if their learning environment is rich in incentives, learning opportunities and challenges. Dealing with mistakes negatively represents a double punishment for pupils with lower social standards. Not only are they disadvantaged socially, but also educationally through a school that judges according to standards they cannot fulfil.

Instead of summarizing, this abstract concludes with five statements that put the question of how to deal with mistakes positively into a broader context:

- Students should be given responsibility and the opportunity to prove themselves instead of being disciplined.
- Students should be given the opportunity to actively acquire knowledge and behaviour; they need genuine, authentic experience instead of prescribed data and facts.
- Teachers are to support progress instead of punishing deficiencies.
- Individualization is superior to standardization.
- Teachers are to help students to reach the next step instead of focussing on what they cannot do.

