

Teachers should teach pupils rather than subjects, says Jan Straka, director of the Teach Live programme

15 June 2017, [Patrik Garaj](#)

The school system is as good as its teachers. Where there are demotivated teachers without self-confidence and lacking practical training and constructive feedback, we cannot expect miracles.

Teach Live, a Czech training programme that accentuates practical skills, shared learning and reflection of experience, is trying to change this. This teacher training laboratory creates know-how which is then put into practice in teacher training schools and in the entire educational system. Apart from that, it wants to address people outside the teaching profession who are interested in teaching and provide them with an accredited training allowing them to enter the educational sector. We have talked about the project with its director **Jan Straka**.

Let's say I have been working for the media for some time and have sufficient knowledge and experience in the field. I feel that I would like to teach, say, media education, but I lack formal training. Would it be beneficial for the society if I started to work as a teacher?

A short answer would be yes.

And a longer one?

I can see at least three questions behind this. First, what education is supposed to look like and what role it should play. The second question is who should or should not teach. And the third one is how to prepare these people. Mentioning media education opens the topic of the role of present schools in the context of social changes. So far, students studied to be prepared for a lifelong career; however, today the chosen profession may cease to exist before they finish their studies.

What should people get from school? Apart from basic literacy, they should develop their ability to learn and be able to react to changes. From the perspective of the labour market, it is clear that people can have five or ten jobs throughout their life. At the social level we believe that students should grow into good citizens. Speaking of media education, this means they should not be misled by fake and false news. The third level is personal – school should teach people how to be fulfilled in their lives.

Let's look at the question who should teach. Does the lack of teachers mean that the profession will have to open?

It certainly will have to open. In the Czech Republic there already is a lack of teachers of certain subjects. There are not enough teachers of physics, IT and languages. What is more, the older generation of baby boom teachers will be retiring within five years, many of them having reached the retirement age already.

Therefore the question is not whether the profession should open but rather when it will happen. There are two extreme opinions: one is that only persons who have studied teacher training can teach, while others think that anyone can become a teacher and training is not important. We are somewhere in between. We believe that the educational system should be more open, but teachers do need a good training. At that's why we have launched the project.

Each society should build an educational system that generates a sufficient amount of teachers. What is the main problem today?

The key issue is money. Teacher salaries cannot compete with those offered to other graduates. In his respect, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have the worst ranking of all OECD countries. This certainly has an influence on what kind of people apply for teacher training schools and teaching jobs. A second question is to what extent teacher training really helps students to become excellent teachers – and this is what we are particularly interested in.



Jan Straka at the Teach Live centre. Source: Tomáš Novák

Who should initiate the changes that are required? Is this a task for the state or rather for bottom-up initiatives?

We chose the way from the bottom up. In the Czech Republic you can become a teacher after completing three plus two years of study, normally at a faculty of education, or after getting a master's degree from any university and completing a "pedagogical minimum" course. Our programme offers a high-quality minimum pedagogical training in terms of both content and cutting-edge training methods. As for the question where to start, we simply try to get things done. We are creating a laboratory to test what works and what does not and

how we can enter the system. The results are already visible after the first year: teacher training schools begin to cooperate with us, which shows that the system is starting to change.

Your programme is aimed at teaching practice. Why do you think that this is where the problem lies?

The project was launched in collaboration with the Depositum Bonum Foundation where we have been working with teachers for some time. We often saw that the share of practical training during their study is very small normally they would have two weeks of teaching practice in the fourth year and four weeks in the fifth. Students were telling us that they would like to have more practical sessions as they need to experience real-life teaching. We know from international surveys that in the best educational systems there is up to 40% share of practical training in teacher preparation, while in the Czech Republic it is between 3 and 10%. We tried to introduce innovations directly at universities, but we had to face the limits imposed by the system.

So we decided to go a completely different way. We brought together a group of people interested in pedagogy, including renowned international experts. The idea was to set up a brand new teacher training programme based on a large share of practice and reflection. We believe that teaching draws on experience. You experience something, think about it, get new ideas, combine them with theory, put them into practice and you learn again. Our students spend two days a week at school where they teach together with an experienced teacher and on Fridays they have meetings where they reflect on the classes taught and they also have theory classes.

The training takes place in real classes. Are schools willing to collaborate with you?

Schools are crucial for us, as our students spend there more than one half of training time. The schools we work with, all located in Prague and its surroundings, have been extremely helpful. Luckily there are many principals who share our philosophy. They are not happy with the teacher training graduates who come to work with them. And therefore they create excellent conditions for our students.

Saying that the educational system should open may make people think that anyone can become a teacher. What are the requirements for your candidates without a degree from a teacher training school?

All candidates should have a degree in a field that is close to the subject they wish to teach. That means that a person with a degree in physics cannot teach history, there has to be a correlation. On the other hand, Czech legislation does not distinguish between different qualifications and the decision who will teach what is left up to the principals. Physics is therefore often taught by teachers of physical education, as there are not enough people with the right specialisation. But we believe that IT should be taught by IT experts and civics by someone who graduated from philosophy or social science.

Does your training programme have a specific methodological background?

There are several key points. The first one is the focus on practice and reflection that has been already mentioned. We are inspired by the reflection-based approach developed by Fred Korthagen in the 1980s. It is based on the assumption that students' experience from

school creates needs and opens questions that are then addressed in class. As for the organisation of the courses, we were inspired by a one-year training offered in Britain bachelor's degree holders who wish to become teachers. The teaching method for mathematic proposed by Milan Hejný is also close to our vision. We generally accentuate practical experience. We focus on the personality of our students and want them to become "education guides", which means that they should be able to create conditions for child development. Although teaching takes place through different subjects, it is important that teachers should teach children rather than subjects. The primary aim is to teach children, which is done by means of subjects. And not the other way round.

What consequences does the lack of practice in teacher training have?

The consequence is that graduates do not know how to teach.

Let's try to be more specific. Some teachers may have difficulties in everyday communication with pupils, resolving conflicts between them and directing their attention.

You have named exactly the main challenges faced by our students, which are also frequently mentioned by teacher training graduates starting to work at schools. Their concern is how to ensure a peaceful environment in the class and create the right conditions for teaching and learning. You can know excellent individualisation techniques and advanced tasks for children but you cannot apply them if your pupils are too noisy. All these things are relatively easy to handle. At the beginning of the course we therefore focus on communication and feedback. Our students have the advantage of working with experienced teachers who know how to cope with these problems. However, graduates are often thrown in the water and are expected to swim, but some of them drown.

You have finished the pilot part of the project. What have you found out and what are the participants' reactions?

We have found out that our approach works. We get a positive feedback from our participants and they find the programme meaningful. We have pedagogy students from other parts of the country coming to Prague to be able to study in our programme. The best proof of meaningfulness is that students spend their free time with us and take something from it. The feedback shows that the practical part of our training is evaluated very positively as it allows our students to experience hands-on teaching and to live different situations. At the same time they are supported by the guiding teacher and experience lecturers. And they also attend group sessions where they go through everything together. Although they are specialised in different fields, these meetings address common issues. This opportunity to share experience is perceived very positively by our participants.

Which is probably not very common in regular schools.

One of the things that will have to change at schools is that teachers should not be so lonely. We have worked with teachers of physics and created peer information sharing centres where they could exchange experience. There we heard stories of teachers who had not talked about their problems to anyone in twenty years and no one ever came to see their class. This is insane. Today most companies look for employees who are able to cooperate and most work is done in team. Schools should teach these skills but do not create

opportunities for teamwork. That is why teaching in pairs is one of the pillars of our method. Students teach in tandem with professional teachers and it is interesting for both of them. Professional teachers have the opportunity to look at their work from a different perspective.

Recently it has been discussed a lot what teaching means and schools have been criticised for insisting on memorising and teaching facts. Do you also address these things?

We continuously discuss with students what the aims of education should be. Our approach is in line with the pyramid of educational objectives proposed by professor Hejný. At the top, you have moral objectives, followed by skills and objectives focusing on knowledge. We want our teachers and pupils to be good persons. Persons with varied skills necessary to succeed in the labour market and personal relationships. The knowledge acquired in itself is the least important thing. And our training has been designed in line with this. The content part is rather limited, we focus mainly on skills and certain moral dimension.

How do you see the future of the project?

We want to target a larger part of the society. We do not want to have just an internal programme for 50 or 100 students that can be recycled again and again. We want to bring the type of teaching that we consider interesting and important to as many children as possible. Therefore we innovate and at the same time we evaluate our programmes very intensively. We have unique conditions also thanks to our private supporters. This allows us to come up with innovations, which is much more difficult to achieve for traditional universities. We have collaborated with teacher training schools right from the beginning and we want to make it possible for them to use our model. We are now signing a memorandum with the Faculty of Education of the Hradec Králové University that should launch a course similar to our training programme next year. We have opened a subject offering teaching practice with Teach Live for students of the Faculty of Education in Prague, which should start in autumn 2017. We also talk to the Pardubice University and the Masaryk University in Brno.

So you do not want to create a parallel world but to change things where it is necessary.

Exactly. The task of the non-profit sector and private initiatives is not to substitute for the system. This is not even possible. The non-profit sector can bring inspiration, innovate and create connections that enable the system to put innovations in practice. Our programme has been designed this way from the beginning. We have a committee of academic experts that consists of representatives of universities and their departments across the country and we also talk to people from the ministry about how we could disseminate our programme. We actively avoid any division between “we” and “them”. Because education should be everyone’s business.

Teach Live is a training programme for future teachers. The training lasts 750 hours, of which one half is dedicated to intensive practical teaching and the second part consists of reflection of the experience and training in groups. The programme is organised by the Depositum Bonum Foundation of Česká spořitelna in cooperation with the Duhovka Group. A pilot

training of students was conducted in 2016 and the programme as such was launched in March 2017.

Jan Straka is project manager of the Depositum Bonum Foundation of Česká spořitelna. He leads the Teach Live programme together with Martin Kozel. He has a bachelor's degree in political science from Harvard University.

The interview was originally published in Slovak weekly TREND, we publish it with the kind permission of the author.

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