

# Paradoxes in teaching and learning: Synthesis of theoretical knowledge, practical experience and personal reflection



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**Abstract:** *Traditional pedagogy has considered education as the process of socialization and the transmission of social heritage left by the previous generations to the younger ones. These educational goals have enormous importance. But the essence of education is to help each individual to become a unique person, to draw out what is hidden within. Education as a process of personality development is “a bridge between potentiality and the actuality”. A perennial paradox exists between socialization and personalization. The fear of surviving, as well as many political and ideological pressures, has not let education realize its essential function entirely. Therefore, what is called ‘education’ has often turned into its opposite. This paradox has not been solved up to now. Recently, the holistic approach has opened a completely new view to reality. From this point of view, education is observed as the interaction and communication between two or among more persons in a human relationship. In the specific space of a human relationship, interaction and communication could come under the impact of conscious as well as unconscious influences. If the unconscious and unintentional influences or activities have greater power than the conscious and intentional ones in education, the possibility of conflict, contradiction or confusion is real, irrespective of our awareness of it. But as we become more aware, we better solve the paradoxes. I have tried to elaborate several paradoxes connected with the human relationship, communication, interaction, as well as with some ordinary truths about teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** *paradox, teaching, learning*

## Introduction

The ripeness that comes with age and great life experience allow me to make syntheses. A good part of my professional life I have dedicated to ‘the mystery’ of education. Mystery is something “hidden or inexplicable” or “something that cannot be or has not been explained”. Could we link these explications with education? Without doubt we could, but not entirely. We should bear in mind that in this case the word “mystery” expresses my personal experience of education and it has more connotative than denotative meaning. Most of all, I have made efforts to build a pedagogical course in teacher education based on *Micropedagogy* as a new branch of *Pedagogy*. The human relationship as a *microcosm* is the focus of *Micropedagogy* because human relations are the real foundation of education in the family, school and no matter where. I have researched education mostly on a micropedagogical level

in connection with human relations, with interaction and communication as the basic processes in teaching and learning, as well as in education in general. Education, as we know, could be understood and analyzed from many more aspects and on different levels. Traditional pedagogy has considered education mainly as a process of transmitting experiences, knowledge, values, etc., from the older generation to the younger one in a particular society. In that case, attention is paid to generations and society.

Education, from a more psychological aspect, could be observed as the process of personality development. From this aspect, education is defined as primarily conscious and intentional influences and organized learning. I completely accept this definition. But, we should keep in mind that education occurs not in a vacuum but in a human relationship where unconscious influences exist besides conscious ones, unintentional ones as well as intentional influences. In this regard, education is understood as mutual and reciprocal personal influences through activity *here* and *now* in the interrelation between the person who educates and the other who is educated. Researching education as an interactive-communicative process at a micropedagogical, i.e. practical, level, I have begun to discover the phenomenon which appears *here* and *now* in educational practice and everyday life. It has always confused me. The book *Paradox in Education* (Bratanic, 2002) is devoted to this phenomenon. What is paradox? “**Paradox** (n), Statement contrary to received opinion; seemingly absurd though perhaps really well-founded statement; self-contradictory, essentially absurd, statement; person, thing, conflicting with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible” (Oxford Dictionary, 1952). Or “**paradox** *noun*: **paradoxes**, a saying which seems to contradict itself but which may be true” (Hands, 1998). In these definitions the main stress is on the words contradictory and conflict. The basic principle of paradox that I have formulated in my book makes clear under which circumstances a paradox may occur in education. From my point of view, a paradox may happen at any time and wherever unconscious stimuli have a greater influence than conscious ones. In most cases, the situation seems conflicting and confusing for those who take part in educational activities.

The concept of paradox as such does not exist in traditional pedagogy based on the old mechanical paradigm. Besides, the dominant positivistic orientation of pedagogical research has put an emphasis on empirical facts rather than profound truths. P. J. Palmer has pointed out that “profound truth, rather than empirical fact, is the stuff of which paradoxes are made” (Palmer, 1998, p. 63). There is good reason for the concept of paradox to have appeared with the new holistic paradigm which aspires to wholeness in all sciences as well as in pedagogy. I would like to describe some paradoxes in the form of syntheses of theoretical knowledge, practical experiences and personal reflections. I agree with P. J. Palmer that “the principle of paradox can help illuminate the selfhood of any teacher and the construction of any teaching and learning space” (Palmer, 1998, p. 77). Reading his book we may discover something about the sources of paradoxes in teaching that have authenticity for each of us.

### **Paradoxes connected with human relationship**

Human relationship is a complex, dynamic and energetic space between two or among more persons. Since it is the most important factor among many to influence personal growth and social development, it is also an important factor in teaching and learning. “The powerful relationship between teacher and learner is central to the teaching process (Delors, 1996, p. 145). The essential characteristics of each interpersonal relationship are: interaction, reciprocity, circular stimulating and the agency of unconsciousness (Bratani, 1993). But, the relationship between teacher and student, as well as any other educational relationship, has its specifics. As this is a matter of persons who are on different levels of ages, maturity,

knowledge, experience, etc., there are difficulties in establishing reciprocity: interchanging the positions of subject and object in the relationship, confrontation of opinions and effectuation of dialogue. The aspiration for equality, cooperation, and dialogue between such unequal persons could be very paradoxical. This is a profound truth. But there is another profound truth that teaching and learning, as a unique educational process, are primarily based on equal dignity, dialogue, and cooperation. We, as teachers and educators at the same time, must resolve this paradox, helping our students to resolve it, too. It is important in higher education in general, but I would particularly stress the importance of training students as future teachers to become aware of this paradox.

Another paradox is linked with the professional and personal elements in the relationship. In a way, the educational relationship is a professional one, but, first of all, its success depends on personal elements such as affection, feelings, attitudes, thoughts, needs, interests, etc. As a professional relationship it should be more objective and rational, but in essence it is very subjective and irrational. The teacher and the student as human beings involve themselves in human relations as a whole, not in separate parts of their personality. Unless we respect the wholeness of the teacher's and student's personality as a profound truth, the paradox could disrupt the quality of the human relationship and the successfulness of all our attempts. The professionalism of the teacher includes competence in the subject taught as well as competence in teaching, but we should also be conscious that *we teach who we are* (Palmer).

### **Paradoxes connected with interaction and communication**

Interaction is that invisible but important component of mutual and reciprocal influence in every human relation based upon thoughts, feelings, attitudes, needs, will, etc. Interactions make up those invisible threads of which the communicative network is knit. Education as an interactive process is affected not only by rational and conscious influences, but even more by irrational and unconscious ones. Paradoxes occur when unconscious influences are dominant. Communication is interaction through signs and symbols. It is verbal and nonverbal activity in the exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, attitudes, etc. Silence can also be a specific kind of communication.

“Just as the mode of the rational mind is words, the mode of the emotions is nonverbal. Indeed, when a person's words disagree with what is conveyed via his tone of voice, gesture, or other nonverbal channel, the emotional truth is in *how* he says something rather than in *what* he says” (Goleman, 1995, p. 97). Many paradoxes could occur subsequent to this truth. “I don't accept and understand teachers only because of the words they pronounce, but because of the feelings which emanate from them. The contents of the subject taught are inseparable from the teacher and they are strongly connected with his personality” (Student, second year of study in teacher education).

Communication as the foundation of all interpersonal relationships is much more than the exchange of words. One person brings to the communication much more than just the content of the message: he or she brings the whole of himself or herself. Communication requires a higher degree of awareness than we ordinarily possess. If the degree of awareness is lower, then observing and resolving paradoxes is lower, too. But traditional pedagogy did not deal with paradox or communication. The quality of interpersonal communication is the key to successful teaching and learning at every level of schooling. Human communication has two inseparable levels: the first is connected with the relation between persons, and the second is connected with the contents. The first level is more connected with nonverbal communication. Trust and co-operation are the main conditions for effective and efficient communication. A

paradox connected with this level could occur when an unconscious process like a projection is interpolated. For example, the teacher could experience the student as a person who was not trustworthy. But in fact he projects his own unconscious mistrust into his student who needs to experience his teacher as trustworthy, and vice versa. In this case, the paradox will be resolved if the teacher becomes more aware of his selfhood.

In connection with the second level, especially in a pedagogical sense, the paradox could occur because official teaching contents are not in coordination with the students' personal experiences. So seldom, as far as I know, do we treat students' experiences as sources of pedagogical knowledge. On the level of contents, effectiveness and efficiency are realized when the receiver interprets the sender's message the way the sender intended. Further, on this level, it is also important that congruence exists between what the teacher says, what he does, and what he is. "One student I heard about said she could not describe her good teachers because they differed so greatly, one from another. But she could describe her bad teachers because they were all the same: 'Their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like the balloon speech in cartoons'. /.../ Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching – and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life" (Palmer, 1998, p. 11).

### **Paradox of communication as specific 'breathing'**

Biological breathing as a form of paradox includes inhaling and exhaling. From my point of view, interpersonal communication among people, especially among teachers and their students, is a specific mode of 'sociological breathing', metaphorically speaking. In the classroom the teacher and students should communicate by a system of 'inhaling' and 'exhaling'. If the teacher allows himself to speak for most of the time during the teaching without mutual and deep communication with his students he cannot create a favourable atmosphere in teaching. "Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance, and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen" (Palmer, 1998, p. 75).

Paradox can occur because the students are used to a traditional method of teaching. Some specific paradoxes may have wider implications on society, as one of my students has commented. "For me", he said, "stressful and tiring courses are those in which the contents are just lectured without thinking of the methods how to do it, or, what is more important, who they are lectured to. This seems to me as a paradox of our educational system, which, however, has wider implications, because it is transmitted imperceptibly to other spheres of social life, so becoming a serious danger for all interpersonal relationships" (Student, second year of study in teacher education).

### **Some ordinary truths as paradoxes**

P. J. Palmer impressed me with some ordinary truths about teaching as paradoxes. These truths would be important for those who have a similar experience and become aware of paradoxes. In the past few years, at the beginning of the academic year, I have felt more difficulties than earlier. This has been very strange for me. I have done my best to improve myself and my work. I have participated in numerous workshops, especially workshops dedicated to experiential learning which have been very useful to me.

Every academic year I improve my teaching step by step by developing the curriculum and attempting to synchronize the contents and methods, and harmonizing my relationship with

the students. At the end of the academic year I experience a sort of blessing. The students' achievements are the reward for my efforts. I would like to continue working with the same generation of students, but at the beginning of the new academic year another generation awaits me. Why am I feeling so awful, so worried, so anxious? I positively know that this is something paradoxical. It has taken time to understand that this was a question of discrepancies between my development level and that of my students. The more I developed myself the more I moved away from them. I had to find a way to bring my students to the level which would satisfy me. I recognize almost the same paradox in Palmer's thought, expressed more gently as follows: "The knowledge I have gained from thirty years of teaching goes hand in hand with my sense of being a rank amateur at the start of each new class" (Palmer, 1998, p. 63).

"At the beginning", one of my students said, "I was not satisfied, on the contrary, I was angry because I had to speak about myself and my thoughts directly to persons I did not know. I was used to the style of teaching where the professor explicates until the students sit and take notes. I was confused because I did not know what the professor expected and how we had to learn for the exam. After some time many things became clear to me..." (Student, second year of study in teacher education). This paradox cannot be resolved only at the level of a teacher-student relation outside the institution and the school system as a whole.

At an early stage of my pedagogical practice I had observed that teaching and learning denied students' feelings. I tried to illuminate the connection between head and heart, cognition and emotion, and the rational and irrational sphere of human personality. Palmer also stressed the link between intellect and feeling when he said: "Intellect works in concert with feeling, so if I hope to open my students' minds, I must open their emotions as well" (Palmer, 1998, p. 63). In the middle of the seventies I did my master's thesis on "Didactics synthesis of cognitive and emotional tasks in teaching". Further research shows that sympathy, positive feelings and attitudes play a significant role in teaching and learning. Without positive feelings it is not possible to develop empathy which is so important in the educational process.

Empathy as a human ability is connected with reciprocal understanding and successful communication. It is a complex ability with physiological, kinetic, psychical and moral aspects. The spiritual dimension of empathy should be taken into consideration. The empathy psychic aspect includes an affective component and a cognitive one. The affective elements are: sensitiveness to another person's feelings and identification with another person's status. The cognitive factors are: consideration of another person's point of view and the acceptance of another person's social role (Bratani\_, 1993). Empathy is built on self-awareness. "The more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings.... Failure to register another's feelings is a major deficit in emotional intelligence, and a tragic failing in what it means to be human" (Goleman, 1995, 96).

The results of the study that D. Goleman mentions suggest that the roots of empathy can be traced in infancy. Empathy has considerable importance in interpersonal communication because it is connected with successful listening to and better understanding of the other person. This matters a great deal in recognizing and understanding paradoxes and in helping to discover their causes. As an ability which links the *ratio* and positive feelings, empathy can stimulate love as a spiritual power. With love we can 'move the mountain', figuratively speaking.

Palmer has mentioned some paradoxes connected with the old paradigm of education. “The world of education as we know it is filled with broken paradoxes – and with lifeless results: we separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think. We separate facts from feelings. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today. We separate theory from practice. Result: theories that have little to do with life and practice that is uninformed by understanding. We separate teaching from learning. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk” (Palmer, 1998, p. 66). From the holistic point of view, education is observed as a whole, teaching and learning become a unique educational process, thinking and feeling are connected, as are theory and practice.

In all human activities, as well as in education, love is that power which interconnects and breathes life to all it touches. “What, then, is love?” Jampolsky has asked. His short definition of love is very simple: “The essence of our being is love” (Jampolsky, 1983, p. 52). Therefore, love is also the essence of education. “Communication with others is from love to love /.../. Yet when communication is based on love, it is deeply satisfying and healing” (Jampolsky, 1983, p. 53).

I would like to emphasize that love has a great role in resolving teaching and learning paradoxes. Without love, teaching and learning remain separate, as do teacher and student. What I want is more love in teaching and learning, i.e. more empathic understanding, more dialogue, more mutual confidence, care and respect. No matter “whether we are comfortable with paradoxes or not” we must become aware of them and become competent enough to resolve them.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional pedagogy does not recognize paradox in education. The reason for this is the mode of thinking, based on a mechanical paradigm, which separates head from heart, facts from feelings, theory from practice, teaching from learning. From this point of view, paradox does not simply exist, but in fact is a real phenomenon. Paradox is a part of our everyday life. Living starts with birth and ends with death. The vital biological function is breathing which includes inhaling and exhaling as paradoxical actions. Interpersonal communication is a special mode of social breathing. Without “social breathing” we cannot be alive, we are socially lifeless. Love, as the essence of the human being, becomes the essence of education.

Love does not exist without inner connectedness among human beings. It seeks openness and mutual trust. The biggest obstacle to the appearance of love is fear. But fear is very frequent in teacher-student relations, and the presence of fear excludes love. Therefore, it is necessary to solve the problem of fear and love in order to resolve the problem of paradox in teaching and learning. But, paradox cannot be solved on a macro-level, so I focus my attention on a micro-level. My reflections, based on theoretical knowledge and practical experience, have been oriented to paradoxes connected primarily with interpersonal relationship, interaction, communication and some truths about teaching and learning. Becoming better aware of ourselves, we become more aware of the sources which produce paradoxes in everyday life and in teaching and learning as well.

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