

# “The poetry of school.”

## *The pedagogy of transfers and transitions at the Lower Austrian University College of Teacher Education*

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### **Abstract**

This paper will explore the issue of *transitions in pedagogy*. It starts by discussing the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus and then moves to a brief overview of current transition projects at the Lower Austrian University College of Teacher Education (PH NÖ). Then the author presents a “brief pedagogy of transitions” in an attempt to expand the *transfer pedagogy* practised at PH NÖ and enlarge its scope to include the idea of *transition pedagogy*. In so doing, he refers to the pedagogical reflections of Peter Bieri, a Swiss philosopher and author, and link Bieri’s arguments with projects that are under way at PH NÖ.

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### *Keywords:*

Pedagogy of transitions  
Projects of transition pedagogy at PH NÖ  
Poetry and school  
Albert Camus - Peter Bieri

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## **1 Albert Camus**

*“At least in M. Bernard’s class, it fed a hunger in them more basic even to the child than to the man, and that is the hunger for discovery. In their other classes, no doubt they were taught many things, but it was somewhat the way geese are stuffed: food was presented to them and they were asked to please swallow it. In M. Germain’s class, they felt for the first time that they existed and that they were the objects of the highest regard: they were judged worthy to discover the world.”* (Camus, 2013, p. 114)

When the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960) was killed in a car crash in 1960 at the age of 47, he was carrying a leather folder, which was found at the scene of the accident. It contained the 144-page manuscript of *The First Man*, an unfinished novel which remained unpublished until 34 years after his untimely death (Camus, 2013). This autobiographical work is regarded as his literary testament today, and possibly even as his most important work. In it, Camus describes a childhood full of privation. He never knew his father, who had been killed in World War I before Albert reached his first birthday. His mother, illiterate and almost entirely deaf, took Albert and his older brother and went to live with the boys’ grandmother in a poor, working-class quarter of Algiers. Besides his taciturn mother, the main formative influence on young Albert was Monsieur Bernard, his elementary school teacher. After receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, Camus wrote in a letter to his old teacher: “Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching, and your example, none of all this would have happened.” (Camus, 2013, p. 257) He describes his school years in two chapters which are of central importance in the novel, although they have been almost entirely ignored by reviewers. Despite being an excellent student at elementary school, Camus was almost prevented from attending grammar school after completing his elementary education. His grandmother initially refused to let him take the entrance examination for the Lycée, since the family was very poor and she wanted him to learn a trade and earn money. His teacher, with great skill and diplomacy, managed to convince Albert’s grandmother to let him go to grammar school after all.

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It is hard to imagine what might have become of the most important French author of the twentieth century if he had been prevented from making this transition. Although ninety years have passed since Camus was a pupil at elementary school, we can still find plenty of material in his scholastic career to serve as a springboard for examining the theme of transition. The narrative of Camus's school years illustrates the close ties between social origins, school types, individual aptitude, and the role of "transition helpers".

## 2 Terminology

The term "transition" is derived from the Latin verb *transire* and denotes simply a passing from one condition or place to another. In philosophical terms, the concept of "transition" refers to the passage from one thing to the next, from one area to another, and thus recalls the Latin root of the word. At the same time, however, transition in philosophy is a movement beyond the sphere of the subject towards something else, something objective – and this dimension of the term bridges the gap between philosophy and pedagogy. Robert Spaemann (\*1927), the German philosopher and ethicist, defines an educated person as someone who has overcome their "animal egocentrism". We all start out with the perspective of being at the centre of our own personal world. In this little world, everything we encounter is merely part of our "environment", and as such, the meanings we assign to things reflect the nature of our own needs. In contrast, an educated person is capable of perceiving reality for what it is. To "educate" is to awaken objective interest; to "educate oneself" is to "make oneself objective". This process involves a fundamental change of perspective: I begin to recognise that I am not the only centre of the universe. Not only are other people part of my world; I myself am part of their world as well. Spaemann describes an educated person as someone who has an interest in the way the world looks through another's eyes and who has learned to widen their own perspective in this way. This change in perspective already hints at the thrust of a pedagogy of transitions. Pedagogical intervention at times or places of transition encourages students to transcend their own horizons without neglecting each student's individual needs (Spaemann, 2001).

## 3 Transfer pedagogy at our college

Even if our lifeworlds have changed since Albert Camus was a schoolboy, the section of his scholastic career we are looking at illustrates a principle that still holds today: namely that pedagogical acts manifest themselves in the context of transitions. Despite his difficult social circumstances, Camus succeeded in transitioning to secondary school thanks to his teacher's help. Let us take a look at the structure of transitions in order to better understand their dynamics. Transfers from one type of school to another take place in three major stages:

- (1) Preparation for an imminent transition;
- (2) Support during the transition as such;
- (3) Compensation for the consequences if the student fails to live up to the standards expected in the new environment (Meuth, Hof & Walther, 2014).

Erwin Rauscher (\*1950) coined a term for this complex process which may be rendered as *transfer pedagogy* in English and has been using it in his published work for over 30 years. While initiating a project at the interface between elementary and lower secondary schools, he became dissatisfied with the connotations of the term *seam*, the German equivalent of which is still used today for the interfaces between school types. He said that "at the point of transition between two school types there is no wound that needs stitching up, and when human beings grow up, surely they should not be left with scars." (Rauscher, 2012, p. 177) His writings stress that the process of transferring from one school type to another should not be a discontinuity, but rather a *variation on a theme that remains the same*. A transfer between schools should be regarded as an opportunity for improving one's life (Rauscher, 2012).

Our college of education is engaged in over 25 projects that aim to promote an understanding of transfer pedagogy that is in keeping with the times. Most of these projects focus on transitions in the school context, in which our researchers deal with the usual transfers – from preschool to elementary school; from elementary to secondary school; and from secondary school to the world of work or tertiary education. As the Austrian school system, unlike that of other countries, places special emphasis on the transition from lower secondary to upper

secondary school, special projects are under way to study this transition. As you know, the school system in Austria, Germany, and parts of Switzerland separates children into different scholastic tracks at a relatively early age. There is a short period of elementary education for all, followed by a sharply differentiated secondary school system (Bieringer, 2015).

When we look at the various research projects at our college, it quickly becomes evident that they are weighted towards *elementary school enrolment* and *secondary school*. Over half the projects deal with the transition from kindergarten to elementary school and focus primarily on mathematics, language, and gifted education. During the school entry phase, the spectrum ranges from the specific fostering of mathematical ability through a large-scale reading study to intensive English teaching. There is a similarly broad variety of projects dealing with the transition to secondary school, including the development and implementation of promotional programmes for girls and for entrepreneurship in the IT sector. The focus of our college on mathematics is also reflected in the development of new study strategies. For this project, teaching practices were evaluated in several elementary and lower secondary schools in order to help acquire quantifiable competences for mathematics education. Another research team is involved in language level studies in children whose first language is not German. Here, too, the findings serve as the basis for individually tailored promotion programmes. There are also a number of initiatives that foster regional responsibility for education by promoting networking between the different educational institutions and organisations. For example, for many decades there was an almost complete lack of communication between kindergartens and elementary schools at the institutional level (i.e. supervising bodies, provincial government, etc.). Our college therefore initiated a joint advanced training programme geared towards bringing the two institutions closer together (Bieringer, 2015).

The transition from school to the world beyond is a field which, in my view, has not yet been sufficiently studied. A few initiatives already under way suggest that our research in this field will be intensified in the future. For example, one project is concerned with the entry of newly qualified teachers into working life and evaluates the impact of career entry programmes for young teachers in primary and lower secondary schools. In the future, university colleges of teacher education will have to cooperate with Austria's universities in the field of lower secondary school teacher training, and this will create an entirely new set of transitions. It is in our own interests to prepare the staff and students of our college for these transitions and to highlight the opportunities for development that they will create. At the same time, we aim to make better use of our international contacts in order to consolidate transition research at our college. The current International Week will thus also serve to kick off more intensive exchanges between us and our partners, and I have no doubt that these will yield new perspectives for all participants. Because of time constraints, I can only provide a very general overview of our research activities in my remarks here, but I will be available throughout the week and for further information about our projects and for putting you in touch with our researchers.

Having quoted Erwin Rauscher a few minutes ago, I would like to repeat that his idea of "transfer pedagogy" is concerned mainly with the institutional level of transition. My own outline of a "pedagogy of transitions" expands this concept by including a "personal" dimension of transition. The resultant dual perspective can be applied to the context of school transitions as follows: Transition research is concerned with the significance of transitions as an array of external, standardised demands made by the school system on the one hand, and with the subjective, individual significance of school transitions on the other. Thus transition pedagogy seeks to mediate between the institutional setting of the student's life and the ways in which individual students deal with transitions, and it also offers assistance for structuring transitions as well as for viewing transitions as fundamental opportunities for the development of the individual.

## 4 Components of a pedagogy of transitions

The pedagogy of transitions focuses on the actors, who not only preserve their identities despite going through transition processes, but for whom transitions represent explicit opportunities for identity development. In this model, pedagogical transitions have a positive connotation and aim to guarantee life improvement. At this point, I am not yet in a position to present a fully developed model of the pedagogy of transitions. However, in addition to the ideas and thoughts of Peter Bieri, I have compiled five building blocks to provide some initial impulses and to show how the fundamental structures of education and the pedagogy of transitions could be related to each other. Of course, five building blocks don't make an edifice – but they may offer inspiration for generating new projects, rethinking old ones, and broadening our horizons of thought.

## 4.1 Education as a voyage of discovery

All education begins with curiosity and an interest in discovering the world. Even Albert Camus would endorse this claim. When you destroy someone's curiosity about a subject, you take away their chances of educating themselves about it. Curiosity is the insatiable desire to find out about everything that can be discovered in the world. It can pursue varying paths: upwards toward the stars, or downwards to individual atoms and the quantum world. Many of our college's transition projects focusing on children are geared towards exciting their curiosity, such as one project that aims to motivate girls to embark on careers in the IT sector. Using a mobile phone app for an online roleplaying game, girls can pretend to be IT entrepreneurs and spend six weeks learning about the different careers in this field in an engaging way. The amount of information waiting to be learned and understood is virtually infinite and increasing on a daily basis. But becoming educated does not mean constantly chasing after the torrent of available information. Rather, it means compiling a rough map of the things that can be known and understood and using it to work out how to learn more about the individual fields of knowledge that make up the map. Education, therefore, always involves learning on two levels: learning about the world – and learning about learning. In the process, two things can develop that are both equally important: a sense of proportion and a sense of precision. To be educated, it is not necessary to know exactly how many countries there are in the world – but it helps to know that the number is closer to 200 than to 100. One should know that the middle ages did not begin with the birth of Jesus and the modern age did not start with the age of enlightenment. The other crucial tool for finding one's bearings in the world is a sense of precision and a grasp of what it means to know and understand something in detail, be it a play, a geological formation, a mathematical formula, or a legal system. Nobody can be a specialist in more than a very small section of the world, nor does the concept of education expect this of anyone. But educated people have an idea of what precision means, and they are aware that education has very different meanings in the different areas of our knowledge map (Bieri, 2008).

## 4.2 Education as awareness of history

Educated minds are characterised by an interest in history. Educated people want to know why we came to think, feel, talk, and live as we do. Awareness of history consists, first of all, of a knowledge of one's own past, both the good and the bad. Our college recently presented a project titled "What it was like here in Lower Austria: 1938 to 1945. Exploring the Nazi years". Students and teachers gathered historical sources, biographies, and information about life in Lower Austria in the Nazi era and used them to develop teaching models (Kainig-Huber & Vonwald, 2014). Enlightened minds have the ability to assess their own culture and identity with a certain detachment and bring irony or humour to bear in the process. This is not the same thing as rejecting one's own life situation. Rather, it means letting go of the idea that one's own form of living is, *by definition*, better even for other people than the form of living they espouse. People who are educated in this sense have a sense of curiosity about knowing what it would have been like to grow up in a different place and time, speaking a different language, or in a different climate. Albert Camus is an excellent teacher here: In *The First Man*, he transports his readers to Algiers in the 1920s and 1930s. Without romanticising, he describes Jews, Christians, and Arabs coexisting peacefully in the working-class quarters. At the time, Camus was writing his doctoral thesis at the University of Algiers on Christian Neoplatonism in Augustine. The reader quickly realises how close the links are between interpreting the past, analysing the present, and forming expectations for the future. Our own lifeworld is not devalued by knowing about alternative options. Rather, such knowledge can enhance our appreciation of the importance of our own identity, since the awareness of alternative models makes identity not an unalterable destiny, but rather a free choice. To paraphrase Peter Bieri: an educated person is someone who has a broad and deep understanding of the many possibilities for living one's life as a human being (Bieri, 2008).

## 4.3 Education as moral awareness

Another aim of the educational process is to instil a sense of moral awareness that expresses itself in tolerance – by which I mean not a superficial toleration of the foreign, but real and natural respect for other people. Of course, this is not always easy. It is especially hard when the foreign violates one's own expectations or demands. How should we respond to an intolerance and exclusion that provokes outrage in our culture, but that is regarded an entirely acceptable part of everyday life in other cultures? I am currently involved in a

transition project run by our college to assess the language levels of children in kindergarten and school. However, the problem is often a deeper one. Previously homogeneous social milieus have become heterogeneous within a relatively short time period, and this situation is also reflected in the classroom. While very little has changed in rural areas, some urban schools may have children of eight different nationalities entering first grade. However, the actors often lack the intercultural competence to cater to the interests of all groups. In particular, the role of the parents in school transition processes is often underestimated and has received very little attention in academia to date. Nor does our student body reflect the diversity of primary and secondary school classrooms. Prospective students from migrant communities are often unable to meet the legal criteria for acceptance, even though they would be in greater demand than ever before as teachers who could serve as role models for migrant children. Education is the difficult art of keeping one's balance between acknowledging the foreign and upholding one's own moral ideas while enduring the tension between these two poles. Tolerance can succeed only where there is a high degree of empathy: people with higher levels of education do better at putting themselves in another's shoes. And so we return to Spaemann, whom I quoted earlier: to "educate oneself" is to "make oneself objective" (Spaemann, 2001). An educated person is someone who has an interest in the way the world looks through another's eyes. The positive consequence of this is that interaction and communication with other cultures becomes much richer (Bieri, 2008).

#### 4.4 Education as articulatory

Educated people are readers. One of the central priorities of our college's transition projects is to encourage children and school students to read. In recent years, over 12,000 children in Lower Austria were assessed for their preparatory skills for written language acquisition with a view to developing supporting measures for elementary school students. It should come as no surprise that Peter Bieri draws very close links between education and reading. He himself is not only a philosopher, but also a successful author who, under his pen name of Pascal Mercier, gained widespread recognition for his novel *Night Train to Lisbon* (Mercier, 2004). But reading books and knowing many things is not enough. Educated people know how to read books in such a way as to be changed by them. They do not merely consume their reading matter; they engage with it, and when they have finished reading, they are different from what they were before. This is an unmistakable hallmark of education in the sense of my concept of the pedagogy of transitions: knowledge is not merely a conglomeration of information; rather, it is something that can lead to interior and exterior change and growth that influences our actions. Educated people are also changed through poetry. One element of this transformative process is learning the language of the soul, to use Bieri's appropriately poetic turn of phrase. Readers know how to speak about human thought, will, and emotion. They also learn that it is possible to have emotional responses to a given issue that are different from the ones they are familiar with from their own perspective. Educated people are able to talk about the world and about themselves more eloquently and articulately than people who simply regurgitate fragments of phrases and thoughts which they acquired by chance a long time ago (Bieri, 2008).

#### 4.5 Education as poetic experience

The title of my paper is derived from Albert Camus's *The First Man*, in which he speaks of the "powerful poetry of school" that gave him a pleasure only school could provide, since his family's poverty and ignorance made his home life harsh and dreary (Camus, 2013, p. 113). Going to school offered him an escape from family life and fed the hunger for discovery that he describes in the passage I quoted at the beginning. "They were judged worthy to discover the world." For Peter Bieri, education is an intrinsic good, like joy, love, and happiness. But Bieri warns against confusing education with training, since education, like poetry, has no immediate utilitarian function. And although education and happiness are not directly related, Bieri believes that certain specific experiences of happiness are closely connected with the issues we have been discussing, such as the joy of achieving a deeper understanding of some aspect of the world; such as the happiness of a reader while enjoying a good book that opens up new horizons; such as the fascination of a play that reveals the similarity of people's life experiences across the centuries. Education creates a framework for life and reveals the deeper meaning of life (Bieri, 2008). The play *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, which has been performed at the 2015 *International Week*, shows how education as a poetic experience can be fused with the pedagogy of transitions (Palacio, 2012). The theme can be summarised in a few words: Auggie is physically disabled, yet he braves the transition from the safety of his home into the unprotected environment of the school. In the process, he grapples with existential questions that affect us all: How do we grow up? What is true friendship? How do we

cope with grief and loss? What role can people with special needs play in society? How do we deal with bullying? The students had to do a comprehensive job: reading a novella in a foreign language, adapting it for the stage, playing the parts of people very different from themselves, and preparing the play for presentation in schools. The project does not limit itself to talking about transitions, but becomes a transitional process in its own right and in a comprehensive sense that places all aspects of the pedagogy of transitions into a relationship with one another. My pedagogy of transitions strives to achieve a poetic structural depth that does not separate form and content. A poem cannot be fully comprehended until it is read aloud and thereby brought to life. Often its content is not fully revealed except by repetition – a simple retelling of what it describes would not suffice to do justice to all its dimensions. Indeed, the level of the content is sometimes overridden in order to allow access to other levels. Like the play *Wonder*, a good poem too never loses its connection to the real world. It reflects the questions which we all have in common. Despite all the obstacles Auggie must face, he experiences transitions as opportunities for personal development. This is a vision that should characterise all transition projects and that may help our college achieve the goals defined in its mission statement: not to stop at merely developing concepts and assistance for structuring transitions, but rather empowering people to experience and utilise transitions as opportunities for personal development and life improvement.

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