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UNIVERSITY TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETAL CHANGES

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mare Leino
Tallinn University,
School of Governance, Law and Society,
Narva Road 25, Tallinn, Estonia
Phone: + 372 58250857
Email: mareleino@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Teaching is a part of socialization: both in society and for society. In this paper, the focus is on the university level. The responsibility of higher education is significant: a new generation receives the possibility to influence society over many decades. When talking about the quality of education, different factors are important. One aspect which influences teaching and learning is the size of study groups. For example – there are 8.4 students per one academic staff member at the top ten universities, according to the World University Rankings. In Tallinn University, where I have been teaching since 1997, this figure is 27.2. After a quarter of a century of teaching experience, it is reasonable to reflect on the situation and ways of coping. In my classes, there have always been 35 or more students. One way to handle big groups is the optimal use of energy, but optimality depends on developments in society: different times predict specific behaviours and styles of teaching. Here, the research method was a reflective approach to teaching. Teachers' self-reflection supports education, because the readiness to analyse processes both inside and outside the school increases objectivity. The aim of this article is to analyse long-term experiences of teaching in the context of changing norms: How can one keep both students and teachers as happy as possible when there is no manual on how to deal with post-Soviet and/or other influences in society? This article concludes that, in my case, teaching began through an approach of trial and error. Later, I started to be proactive: my style of teaching changed in parallel with developments in society, and readiness to reflect become a teaching method.

***Keywords**: university, teaching, self-reflection, society.*

Introduction

Teaching is part of socialization; both in society and for society. In this paper, the focus is on the university level. The responsibility of higher education is significant: a new generation has the possibility to influence society over many decades. When talking about the quality of education, different factors are important.

One aspect which influences teaching and learning is the size of study groups. For example, there are 8.4 students per academic staff member at the top ten universities, according to the World University Rankings. In Tallinn University, where I have been teaching since 1997, this figure is 27.2 (Valge, 2020). After a quarter of century of teaching experience, it is reasonable to reflect on the situation and ways of coping. In my classes, there have always been 35 students or more. One way to handle big groups is the optimal use of energy, but optimality depends on developments in society: different times predict specific behaviours and styles of teaching. After a quarter of a century of teaching experience, it is reasonable to reflect on this process in the context of influences from society. My analysis starts from the 1990s; at first, the Soviet mentality will be described, because this helps to understand the situation in higher education 25 years ago.

Estonia regained independence in 1991. In 1997, when I started teaching at Tallinn University, people remembered the Soviet times well, because both students and teachers came from the old school system – society managed to change faster than the educational system. Socialism was characterised by common obligatory values: society was hierarchical, and this was not disputed openly. The division of power was vertical, and the most important people were party leaders. Changes were not allowed. Individualism was an abusive word, and citizens had to have several collectives: professional – having a workplace was obligatory, even fixed in the law; ideological – being a member of the party; and family-connected – being married was strictly suggested. The Soviet mentality was framed by the ideas of communist "equality in poverty", and was guarded by state-centred bureaucratic order and total ideological control. Life was conducted according to norms: deviations were not accepted, and people from single mothers to alcoholics were outcasts in society – they were even thrown out of the party. There was total silence concerning people with special needs in Soviet society – one did not see them, and one did not know anything about their lives. The Soviet norm was to be in good health, happy, and hard-working (Leino, 2002, p. 45). This forced, pretend collectivism did not suit Estonia – according to Hofstede, Estonia is rather an individualistic country (Hofstede, 2013).

Post-Soviet countries have been seen as "risk societies" because of unexpected processes. According to Webb, security is increasingly negotiated on an expressive, interpersonal level. Giddens's account pays close attention to the way that security is bound up with aspects of reflexive identity. Such an approach requires that we do justice to 'an increasingly significant reflexive subjectivity, and the consequences of a subjectivity engaged in a process of reflexive modernization'. In a risk society, people are increasingly required to develop micro-skills associated with ensuring security in their lived environment and plan for future hazards. They learn to scan reflexively and monitor the external environment for perceptual indices of risk and hazard (Webb, 2006, p. 80). For developing micro-skills, research at the micro-level is needed: my personal teaching story here is one attempt at that.

1. The theoretical background

The research environment at the university, using the communication practices that have developed in society, creates a certain type of rationality (Seregina et al., 2021). This includes reflection from both sides: students analyse themselves and teachers, and vice versa. According to Schnack (1994, p. 188), education is a process of qualifying common sense. Therefore, education in general can be considered as proactive behaviour. According to Webb, proactivity is not possible without the analysis of previous activities. Reflectivity is as much a part of social systems as it is of individual cognition. The reflective process is inter-subjective in the sense that individuals monitor their own and others' behaviour not as isolated acts, but as instances of shared understanding of how to make sense of a complex life. Risk society obliges us to be reflective, and this in turn requires individuals to face choices, freedom, and responsibility. Lawson summarises: reflectivity is a turning back on oneself and a form of self-evaluation within the contingencies and uncertainties of risk society (Webb, 2006, pp. 35–36).

As the wisdom of Socrates teaches us: "The unexamined life is not worth living"; self-reflection allows one to take a step back and gain perspective on what matters and what can be ignored. Reflection is a deeper form of learning that allows us to retain every aspect of any experience, be it personal or professional (Browning, 2020). People reflect personal stories. According to László, our stories are not merely our own private – mental or verbal – narratives. Common experience in a culture or society takes shape in common stories or story frames. Every society has its own "historically crystallised stories", and although individuals may view them from different aspects and create different stories out of the same experienced event, culture informs all its members of the set of possible story frames (László, 2008, p. 8).

In every life there are many stories which can be analysed separately and together, both inside and outside of societal influences. According to Kos (2015), the long-term benefits of self-reflection also include increased professional value and value for personal relationships, resulting in individuals having a greater capacity for work, creativity, and love, and, ultimately, being happier. There are two levels of self-reflection that one should undertake regularly: action retrospective, for regular improvements and adjustments to the environment after every sprint; and self-analysis, for knowing oneself better and being happier in life in the long-term (Kos, 2015). Mountinho, de Melo Breckenfeld, and Laurendon (2020, p. 41) stress that remembering is not only the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless, and fragmentary traces; it is an imaginative construction or reconstruction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experiences (i.e., schemata), and to a few outstanding details which commonly appear in image or in language form (Mountinho, de Melo Breckenfeld & Laurendon, 2020, p. 41). As the social representations theory and cultural psychology stress, remembering is a process that occurs on a collective level as well as at an individual level (Barreiro & Endsleff, 2020, p. 71). Self-reflective remembering is also practical. As Kos (2015) puts it: if there is no change in behaviour – the decisions one makes, the strategy one follows, the actions one performs, etc. – after reflection, then reflection simply had no real value. The purpose of the sprint retrospective is not simply to feel better about oneself for planning and strategizing – one should avoid the fake feeling of progress at all costs. In short: if you do not know what you will do differently after reflection, if you do not know how you will change your behaviour, you are doing

it wrong. Applying wisdom in practice is the key to progress, not only being aware of something (Kos, 2015). In Estonia, we used to say: those who do not remember the past, live without the future – for us, reflection is a kind of national habit or norm.

1.1 Higher education in the context of society

The empirical data in this article comes from remembering/reflecting on teaching experiences during the past 25 years. As it is only my personal story, no ethical harm was caused to anybody. The objects of self-reflection were memories. In the past, I did not take notes for this article, because I did not yet know that an ordinary life can constitute empirical data. In my case, this process also had a practical value: in short, the results of self-reflection helped me to increase optimality in my teaching.

Chronologically, my pedagogical experience can be divided into three parts: 1997–2005; 2006–2012; and 2013–present. The following sections outline some characteristics of these periods.

1.2. Towards an individualistic approach: 1997–2005

When talking about the 1990s in Estonia, Soviet influences were still obvious, because they remained in people's memories. During the Soviet time, authoritarianism at school was tolerated on the grounds that the teacher was always right because they represented the institution. In education, socialist rules meant strict borders and prescriptions – traditions, routines, and etiquette. Hierarchical relations were important (adult–child; teacher–pupil), and socialism at school became evident through the importance of hard work: it was believed that real study had to be achieved with great effort and difficulty – joy and pleasure were excluded. The central concept of a socialist school was that of standardisation – the average was a strict norm. In the Soviet period, the teacher's work was controlled by a very fixed curriculum. The teacher had to observe strict instructions regarding methodological analyses, expositions, and the amount of instructional material. Inspectors mostly checked up on how the teacher kept to the prescribed programme, and deviation from the programme was severely punished. The only exception was the officially recognized innovator, whose methods of work were followed blindly. During the Soviet period, the process of instruction was controlled more than the results. It was thought that the unification of the instruction process would guarantee good results and produce well-educated school-leavers. There was much too strong a preference for factual, encyclopaedic knowledge (primarily natural sciences) in contrast to knowledge-promoting problem-solving, decision-making, or anything that might trigger a change. In short, during the Soviet time, there was a traditional, memorisation-based approach to learning and an authoritarian learning process (Leino, 2002, p. 46). The same style was obvious at university level.

I started to teach at Tallinn University in the social work department in 1997. At first, there were two subjects taught: qualitative research methods and special education – later, social pedagogy and a master's seminar were added. Every summer, I also participated in a panel whose responsibility it was to interview prospective new students. The first social work curriculum in re-independent Estonia was opened in 1992 in our department – the field was innovative and popular. Most of the students in that period wanted to heal the world, or – at least – to

help people. This was a nice, collectivist dream, and, in truth, Estonia needed to be healed after socialism – so why not with the help of social workers?

Higher education was not free, salaries were small, and life was expensive then. Our students wanted to receive as much theoretical knowledge as possible. They preferred lectures (full of new information) instead of seminars, because the image of real study was connected with hard work. A successful school day for students meant many pages of written conspectus. As they had to pay for education, learners wanted to receive something real for their money: a lot of text seemed to be a fair equivalent. I also tried other methods – for example, group discussions and/or project work – but when these methods were implemented too often, I received poorer feedback than from theoretical, old-fashioned lectures.

Once, I was invited to a general education school to give a lecture to class teachers. The principal stressed before the lecture: "You can talk about whatever you want, but, please, do not hold group discussions". The reason for this was that post-Soviet teachers were used to serious, theory-based teaching: they hated simple discussions, because it is always possible to simply talk for free somewhere else. During courses, teachers wanted the chance to write a lot – real wisdom, at this time, came from theories. Later, in the same situations, I found a proactive compromise: if there was no 'official' time for the seminar, teachers were perhaps even too talkative – they want to give examples, to ask, to discuss, and to argue, but only in the middle of a lecture. It seemed that they did not want to be too strictly organized – at least outside of official working hours.

As I had to read a lot, because teaching was a new field for me in the 1990s, I found interesting information from Finnish, German, and English literature (languages that I understood). It was rewarding to share this knowledge with students – I almost acted as a mediator. Tests were mostly theory-based, and students responded to this because after every test their competences improved compared to before – at least in theory.

In 2002, a new curriculum debuted in our department: the master's programme of social pedagogy and child protection. This was, and still is, the only route by which to achieve a master's degree in this field in Estonia. As it provides a double degree, this has been a popular curriculum: in some years, there have been over 5 candidates per study place (Leino, 2021). In 2002, higher education in Estonia was still not free – those who had the possibility to study were happy about it. Theory-based teaching continued, but not so intensively anymore. Younger students welcomed alternative teaching methods: life outside the university was complicated, which also demanded flexibility in the context of study. Social problems changed, and the financial crisis started to appear around the world. Theories were not popular anymore, and students started to prefer seminars and discussions. The social system in Estonia developed, and new themes/conflicts arose in the context of values, which needed discussion. For example, according to Clough, the regulation of social care actually makes people less trustworthy because service providers adopt the habit of relying on regulators to impose standards, thus diminishing their own sense of responsibility. In line with neo-liberal practice, they put the question of responsibility into the context of a contest, not the context of common values. Cynics argue that, rather than making professionals more accountable, these blame systems put a very high premium on avoiding responsibility and deflecting possible blame or legal liability onto someone else (Webb, 2006, pp. 69–70).

1.3. The influences of the financial crisis: 2006–2012

In this century, collectivism seems to be "out" and individualism "in" – the role of every citizen is stressed in making their own life liveable. In the context of the financial crisis, coping mechanisms depended on people themselves, because the social security system in Estonia was not sufficiently developed. To put it correctly: the system existed, but there was a lack of money at the state level. The time for individualists had started, but the possibilities for that were limited – in the middle of a financial crisis, it is hard to be alone.

During that time, in entrance interviews, many prospective students openly stressed the financial need to cope with life: a master's degree, especially if it gives the right to work both as a social pedagogue and/or as a child protector, helps to find a job (Leino, 2021). During and after the financial crisis, people valued safe incomes, even relatively small ones. The dream of saving the world and helping people was not real anymore. Students in classes were active, and asked a lot of questions: the lecturer was rather a consultant than a pedagogue. Teaching talkative people was interesting, although students worked harder outside the university than inside. Only a few students had rich enough families to support their study. Most had to keep full time jobs to cope with life, as the financial support system for students did not cover everything. However, good education means intensive study. According to Eurostudent research, Estonia is in 2nd place in the context of working students in the EU. This means that study is not intensive (Valge, 2020). According to Sutrop (2021), 78% of students have a job, because otherwise they cannot cope. In Estonia, students spend 53 hours weekly on work and study. The Eurostudent survey shows that the EU average is 47 hours per week. This overload decreases study quality, raises the dropout rate, and causes mental health problems (Sutrop, 2021).

Therefore, students read less but worked and lived more. With verbal skills, it was easy to cover the lack of knowledge. Some students had very high competences in talking openly, whereas quiet people suffered. For social justice, I still sometimes had to control students' knowledge with tests regarding theory – as a result, every personality type had the possibility to shine. Temperament in education is an important theme (Leino & Mullola, 2014).

Social problems in society changed, and people changed too. The field of social pedagogy grew stronger in Estonia: more schools hired specialists called social pedagogues. The financial crisis in society was one impulse for this, because the social problems of families entered schools via pupils. As one of the tools of social pedagogy is negotiation/consultation/talking, verbal skills also started to become more important in our curriculum. Students liked this, because they needed these competences in everyday work. Students' ages, educational backgrounds, and working fields were and are different, as our curriculum is in a sense "open" (Leino, 2021). In class, they share experiences between each other, and this has been enlightening: seminars, instead of long, handwritten conspectuses, were and are popular and loved. In providing feedback, students observed that their teacher "doesn't avoid questions"; "supports discussion"; and "is ready to talk about actual problems in society". I inferred that excitement about theories was over, and it was now obligatory to carefully choose the subjects to be shared in lectures: new information must be interesting and connected to practice. Everything had to have personal meaning – this is what individualism is about. For individualists, enjoyment, the value of each moment, and the slogan 'this is your life and you live only once' seemed to be important (Leino, 2002, p. 46). In general education, so-called alternative teaching methods started to become popular – now, these are the

main methods, and the same processes are obvious in post-compulsory education.

Personal responsibility and individualism suit Estonians. According to Heidmets, people in Estonia lean more towards revelling in individual pleasure and less towards attaching importance to collective responsibilities (Heidmets, 2007, pp. 114–115). Hofstede (2013) put it simply: Estonia is an individualistic country. Among Estonians, there is a solid conviction regarding personal responsibility and everybody's own achievements and contributions in order to be self-fulfilled. Achievement is reflected directly through personal responsibility. Given the loosely knit social framework of individualistic countries, where progress in life does not depend on how well connected one is, transparency and honesty rather than harmony and loyalty are considered virtues (Hofstede, 2013). According to Fukuyama (1999), growing individualism is a result of greater prosperity, not the result of poverty. As income levels rise, the bonds of interdependence that tie people tightly together in families and communities weaken. Wealthier states such as the United States, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries tend to have more individualists than poorer countries (Fukuyama 1999, p. 69). This is exactly what happened in Estonia: growing individualism was the result of greater prosperity. According to Southam-Gerow (2013), an individualist culture emphasises the needs and desires of the individual; it places high value on personal time, freedom, challenges, and such extrinsic motivators as material rewards of work. Individualist cultures emphasise self-actualization and self-realization (Southam-Gerow, 2013). In our department, students' individualism developed year by year. From this period, I remember more than one prospective student who wanted to change the time for the entrance interview (in July) because of a holiday. Both hedonism and individualism were obvious. Some students wanted to change the times of tests, exams, and even lectures because of their working hours – without even asking other students first. In the 1990s and before, this would be a scandal, but not in the 21st century. Complains about marks were also an issue: individualists rather overvalue the personal energy which was put into academic achievement, whilst collectivists rather undervalue it. As such, during this period I had to more often explain the background of marks. Soon, I learned from this and started to write programmes extremely carefully, so that the details of every criteria, sanction, etc., were transparent in black and white. For individualists, documents are most important, and complaints about marks stopped. According to Webb (2006, p. 21), technical rationality is often used interchangeably with 'instrumental rationality', and is linked to the concept of calculative reason: Weber was concerned that technical rationality was becoming more dominant in Western society than other types of rationality. This is sometimes referred to as an "outcome mentality", whereby rules, regulations, and procedures prioritise the ends to be achieved rather than the means used to obtain them (Webb, 2006, p. 21).

1.4 Free education and the time of personalities: 2013–present

After the financial crisis, life was almost back to normal again – except some had lost their homes, jobs, or everything. Coping with life was a challenge. According to O'Malley, we have entered an era of neoliberalism in which risk management becomes the dominant strategy for the regulatory governance of welfare. This strategy becomes circular because the increasing cumulative effect of 'manufactured uncertainties' results in risk management being continuously undermined and then having to be renewed under new expert guises. Expert systems crack under the weight of their own internal inconsistencies, the pressures of reflexive consumerism, and the

demands of service users (Webb, 2006, p. 56). There are a number of studies which show that a significant shift towards hedonistic as well as postmodern or Western values took place during the transition period. However, regardless of the growth of these indicators, compared to people in Scandinavia, for instance, Estonians continue to be considerably less trusting, less tolerant, and less happy, and tend to place greater emphasis on fighting rising prices and maintaining order in the state than on freedom of speech and political participation. Estonia continues to be positioned in the group of former Soviet republics and African countries in which the percentage of people that stress post-materialistic values is 5% or even less, and this percentage has not notably changed in the last 20 years. Moreover, in the last 20 years, the number of people in Estonia who would not openly support a protest under any circumstances has doubled, reaching 57% in 2011. Based on Inglehart and Welzel's theory of cultural change, the latter speaks to the importance of survival values (Realo, 2013, p. 57). This was the situation around 10 years ago, when my third period of teaching began.

There is nothing bad in trying to survive. In small Estonia, with 1.3 million inhabitants, of whom less than one million are Estonians, we are proud of ourselves and our culture. We have survived so far partly because of education, which has been important for many centuries. To raise this level even more, the Ministry of Education and Science implemented the following reform: since September 2013, it has been free to study at all universities in Estonia. As a result, our curriculum became even more popular, but the academic level suffered, because one group just "wanted to try university": when it is free, there is no risk. To be specific, student groups were polarized: one part was eager to study, as they had not had the possibility before because of university fees; others came just to try.

As the general spirit in society moved from collectivism (in the 1990s) to individualism (in the 2000s), students' voices got louder. They expressed opinions about obligatory literature (if there was too much on the list) or about the rules of exams. I received emails from some students that started with: *Hello*, *Mare* or *Dear Mare*. Students behaved as equals to teachers, which was different from Soviet hierarchical relations; the time of individuals had started, and students' self-esteem was high. One of my colleagues even lost their job because students were not happy about her style of teaching – they felt she did not respect students enough.

Some students entered university just to try, and many of them dropped out – simply trying is not enough, and higher education is not obligatory. However, dropping out is bad: the higher the dropout rate, the fewer places the department receives for new students. Because of this, teachers had to perform better. The only way to reduce the dropout rate was to reduce academic demands. Students became clients, and the department a convener. This process has continued in Estonia. According to Valge (2020): "The quality of higher education in Estonia has decreased – no one who has taught for at least the 20 last years in university denies this, as far as I know".

As one part of students still wanted to learn, it was a challenge to find a compromise – for the teacher, this meant the need for personal approach. I added even more detail to programmes, especially when describing the minimum level required to pass. Because some students just wanted to pass, there had to be a possibility for them to do so. The maximum level was, and still is, described equally as carefully. Most students stay somewhere in-between these extremes, but social justice is important: those who work more must be rewarded. Individualists, especially, understand this, and the best students/works were and are always named. I suggested that students

share their writing among others, and this seems to be a productive teaching tool. Quite soon, passive students began to work more, and the spirit of study and/or the value of knowledge grew stronger in the whole group. For the teacher, this makes life easier: when a minimum-oriented student reads the text of an eager student, extra explanations about marks are not needed.

During the last 4–5 years in entrance interviews, there have been fewer people "trying their luck". This new trend is a calculated choice – according to Giddens: "living in a risk society means living with a calculative attitude" (Webb, 2006, p. 126). Most people who want to study our curriculum have a special background: voluntary work in Africa, Brazil, or elsewhere; participation in community projects in Estonia; work with voluntary organizations; fighting for the environment; being a foster parent; having a relative with special needs; or having work experience in the field already. The main motive to study is to attain additional theoretical knowledge, because they already possess expertise in practice. To them, teaching should be personally directed: specific literature or joint projects on a rare, interesting subject could be suggested. A personal approach raises the quality of education, and makes the teaching more interesting. In big groups, the richness of everybody can be used: when students give presentations about their own interests, connected to the subject, everybody wins. They receive positive feedback, self-esteem rises, and they also get to know each other better. The extra effect is that students start to think outside the box: there is no distinction between the academic university world and the real world outside, as everything is mixed in social policy. As risks in the world are global, thinking must cross borders. According to Furedi, "being at risk" becomes a fixed attribute of the individual, like the size of a person's feet or hands. Regulation consists of reducing the degrees of freedom for individuals or groups through the self-selection of future risk events; it is concerned with possible loss reduction. Therefore, we can see how risk prevention and mitigation explicitly calculate the possibility of breakdown, disruption, and permanent damage (Webb, 2006, p. 71). The bigger risks are, the less teaching can concern limited academic content, because one of the characteristics of risk is to be unexpected. In short, this means that one simply doesn't know what to teach. During the last 10 years, differently from Soviet times, study has ceased to be about hard work, but is now rather connected with fun and joy. COVID-19 supports different virtual possibilities: Kahoot, Quizlet etc., are popular study games. The concept of *Homo Ludens* – that the central gist that determines a person's essence is playfulness (Liimets, 1999, p. 20) – seems to be legitimate. From the hedonistic point of view, study must not be too hard – during the last 25–30 years, the paradigm has changed a lot. This is quite a short time in which to change the value system in society, and it demands flexibility. Small countries can be flexible if needed and if possible. Good education and the readiness to change may also be behind our e-success: Estonia is famous because of Skype, e-residence, and a high level of internet-based government services. Based on data from April 2021, Estonia has the most unicorns (start-up companies that have been valued at over a billion dollars) per capita (Peeterson, 2021). In mathematics, two negatives create a positive. This can be the case in social sciences, too: a society that has suffered, paired with large study groups, can together increase personal possibilities. In chaos, it is obligatory to be flexible; and in messy situations, it is easier to focus on personal interests, because nobody notices. Large study groups in some Estonian universities do not preclude success in life, perhaps even the opposite.

2. Additional reflections towards the future

The quality of general education in Estonia is high. PISA 2018 shows that Estonian students ranked first among European countries in all three domains of assessment; they also placed first in reading and science, and third in mathematics among the OECD countries. One of many explanations for this, according to Jeffreys (2019), is that:

> Teachers in Estonia have a relatively high level of freedom to take risks in how they design lessons. When Estonia regained independence from Russia, it looked to its neighbour Finland for education ideas. Minister for Education and Research Mailis Reps says they have aimed for a Nordic level of equity, and that has a cost. Free in Estonia really means free. You don't pay for textbooks, you don't pay for the school lunches, you don't pay for school transportation.

Education, the minister argues, has always been valued in Estonia, but now it is in the context of an entrepreneurial and fast-growing economy:

> So – what we have today is a tradition to study a lot, a little bit like Asian countries. We study for many many hours. That means a lively and continuing debate among parents about whether there is too much homework (Jeffreys, 2019).

Compared to the picture of the Soviet school mentality described in the beginning of this article, the situation has changed – both in society and in education. As general education influences higher education through values, the entrepreneurial spirit is also an important context in my lectures. According to an analysis of society, this is what should be taught (among other themes). Some students already own a company in the social context – study for them should be focused on a special theme, as much as possible. Most students work or will work for local governments and/or in schools – they have other interests/needs, and all of them want to learn about law and psychology. From theory-based teaching, I have moved toward a flexible, student-centred approach. Project work is an element of all courses, as it is important to help students to find a balance between schooling and their jobs.

When I started teaching in university, the main focus was on the content of lectures – I didn't even think about society. After 25 years of teaching, society comes first, because the aim of study must not be a diploma but something more. This kind of proactive education avoids problems in the future. It sounds simple, but in truth it is not. For example, a complicated energy crisis has developed, which in Estonia seems to be destroying the middle class (Neivelt, 2021). What should be taught to students of social pedagogy and social work, if most people in society are poor and only some are very rich? Now is the time for the government to be proactive. It seems as if the fourth period of my teaching career has begun in 2022, the headline of which may be: unexpectedness/crises. According to Webb: "Living in a risk society means living with a calculative attitude. Calculating and trying to manage risk, which often people have little knowledge of, has become one of the main preoccupations in modern societies" (Webb, 2006, pp. 24, 126). In 2022, this wisdom is still valid, and higher education should provide knowledge about constant risk management as a new norm.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to analyse the experiences of teaching over decades, in the context of societal change. The risk society in Estonia influenced both the form and content of education. Teachers' wellbeing depends on students, and vice versa. In my case, there are 35 or more students in each class – it is not easy to teach large groups, especially when expectations change over time. With the empirical data in this article, I highlighted the role of self-reflection in the context of societal change and personal teaching style: it has been my story. According to László, people create stories because they want to understand their world, and they also share these stories with others. Senses of community and social identity are both rooted in narratives; furthermore, even the social anchoring of our most seemingly individualistic memories takes place with the help of narratives (László, 2008, p. 99). This article concludes that, in my case, teaching larger groups began through an approach of trial and error. Later, I started to be proactive: the style of teaching changed in parallel with society. Now, when the world is not predictable anymore, improvisation seems to be necessary: flexibility and resilience are the new norms. From here, a suggestion for young teachers arises: as students' motivation and values are 'ready' before they enter university (and are shaped by the society), the educational institution should follow them. This is useful for both sides: students enjoy learning more, and teachers can optimize their energy.

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UNIVERSITY TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETAL CHANGES

Assoc. Prof. Dr., M.A., Mare Leino

Tallinn University, Estonia

Summary

Wellbeing should be universal, at least in an ideal world, but the concept of wellbeing itself changes in time: what seemed to be good 30 years ago is not always so anymore. In this paper, the focus is on the university-level.

One aspect which influences teaching and teacher wellbeing, is the size of study groups. For example – there are 8.4 students per one academic staff-member at the top ten universities, according to the World University Rankings. At Tallinn University, where I have taught since 1997, this figure is 27.2. After a quarter of a century of teaching experience, it is reasonable to reflect on the situation and ways of coping. In my classes, there have always been 35 or more students. One way to handle large groups is the optimal use of energy, but optimality depends on developments in society: different times predict specific behaviours and styles of teaching.

The aim of this article was to analyse the experiences of teaching over decades, in the context of society and the concept of wellbeing. The risk society in Estonia influences both the form and content of education. Teachers' wellbeing depends on students, and vice versa, and an important factor here is the society: wellbeing has to harmonize with the norms of the society, but people hardly think in such a broad category. With the empirical data in this article, I outline the role of societal changes in influencing teaching style.

The research method in this paper was a life review: a reflective approach to personal teaching history. According to László, people create stories because they want to understand their world, and they also share these stories with others. Senses of community and social identity are both rooted in narratives; furthermore, even the social anchoring of our most seemingly individualistic memories takes place with the help of narratives (László, 2008, p. 99). This article is a summary of my work experience, which can be divided into three parts according to significant influences from society.

The article concludes that, in my case, teaching larger groups began through an approach of trial and error. Later, I started to be proactive: the style of teaching changed in parallel with society, and so did the concept of well-being. Now, when the world is not predictable anymore, even proactivity is difficult. It seems as if improvisation (trial and error at a new level) will once again be necessary. Flexibility is needed in society, in education, and also at the personal level.

This article concludes with a recommendation: as teaching has always been about preparation for living in society, proactive behaviour is important. The main impulses in education should come from the analytical observation of society – only then can this process be considered optimal, and can wellbeing at all levels rise significantly. According to Webb: "Living in a risk society means living with a calculative attitude. Calculating and trying to manage risk, which often people have little knowledge of, has become one of the main preoccupations in modern societies" (Webb, 2006, pp. 24, 126).

Keywords*: university, teaching, self-reflection, society.*

Mare Leino, PhD in Philosophy (in the field of social work), associate professor at the School of Governance, Law and Society at Tallinn University. Research areas: students with learning and/or behaviour difficulties, in the field of compulsory and post-compulsory education.