

# How does a teacher help a student ?

A reflection that comes from a particular teaching moment, thought out with the help of Rachel Naomi Remen's text *Educating for mission, meaning, and compassion*<sup>1</sup> and the help of Gert Biesta's work.

I am giving a class in an Efterskole.

We are on the floor, bellies against the parquet floor of this room. The sun is coming through the windows, the colors are warm, pleasant, comfortable. I try to break down the action of crawling for the students, as I have observed that they experienced difficulties doing it during the first crossing of the space. I talk, explain the hand and toe actions. While doing. They try too. I have them try in a minimal way "how does it move your body a millimeter to push here, to pull here", just to register the feeling. Their faces are towards me. I see this girl, between other students, she's a little bit back but I see her face. I had noticed while they were crawling for the first time that she was having a lot of trouble. After explaining and having them test these micro-movements necessary for crawling, I ask "does it make a difference?". She answers "no!

I hesitate to go to her and try to understand what the particular problem is with her body organization, but I tell myself right away that it might be uncomfortable for her to be the center of attention, and also, what is the rest of the group doing during this time? So I say as I stand up: "if what I've explained doesn't change anything for you, try to find a way for you to crawl that works, you can go on your side, or on your back, try to find what works for you". Faces are hard to read.

The theme that arises from this moment, for me, is: « how does a teacher help a student? ».

## Why did I choose this theme ?

I took a wholistic approach, I read the whole text that describes the moment, I looked at it as a whole, and I thought that the meaning of this significant moment lay in my hesitation of what to do with this student who was not able to do what I wanted her to do, the expected outcome. My hesitation of how best to help her, not just to get her to do what I wanted, but to take into account her person, perhaps shy, perhaps reluctant to be the center of attention.

Then I asked myself, "what sentence could I make up that may capture this essential meaning of this text that I have just targeted?". I formulated, "How does a teacher help a student?".

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from: *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, pages 33-49. Edited by Steven Glazer (1999). Rachel Naomi Remen is associate clinical professor of family and community medicine at the UCSF School of Medicine, the medical director of the Commonwealth Cancer Help Program, and the director and founder of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness at Commonwealth.

To think about this, I want to use the notion of training and the notion of education, as described in Rachel Naomi Remen's text *Educating for mission, meaning, and compassion*.

## **The Concept of Help**

To begin discussing a concept, I start from the principle that we must choose a primary definition of this concept, in order to have a solid ground to support our questioning, and not to start thinking in a vacuum. This does not prevent us from questioning this solid ground on which we stand, or even from deconstructing it in small pieces and reconstructing another, more adequate one.

Let's take a possible definition of the concept of help: "Action of intervening in favor of a person by joining its efforts to hers/his ». ((Le Robert dictionary))

This definition states that a relation of help is :

- an inter-individual relationship;

According to this definition, it takes at least two to help. A helping relationship would then be an inter-individual relationship.

- a non-reciprocal relationship;

This relationship defines roles that, in essence, are not of the same kind. The helped does not hold the same role as the helper (conversely, a friendship relationship implies a "reciprocal affection", and does not contain in its very essence a differentiation in roles).

- but reciprocal efforts;

Helping someone would imply the notion of effort, both on the part of the helper and on the part of the helped. According to this definition, it would seem that one cannot call "help" an action in which the person one seeks to help is not also active. Helping would then require a double activity on the part of the people involved.

- a relationship that is in favor of the person being helped.

This definition also brings into play the notion of "being in favour of". The help must be in favor of the person being helped. If my action is not in favor of the person I am trying to help, then I cannot call my action a helping action.

This definition raises questions:

The question of the criteria for determining whether an action is "in favor of":

Who defines whether the action is in favor of the assisted? How to define if the action is in favor of the person being helped? What are the criteria that can allow us to define whether or not the action is beneficial to the person being helped? How can this be measured?

The question of « help to do what? »:

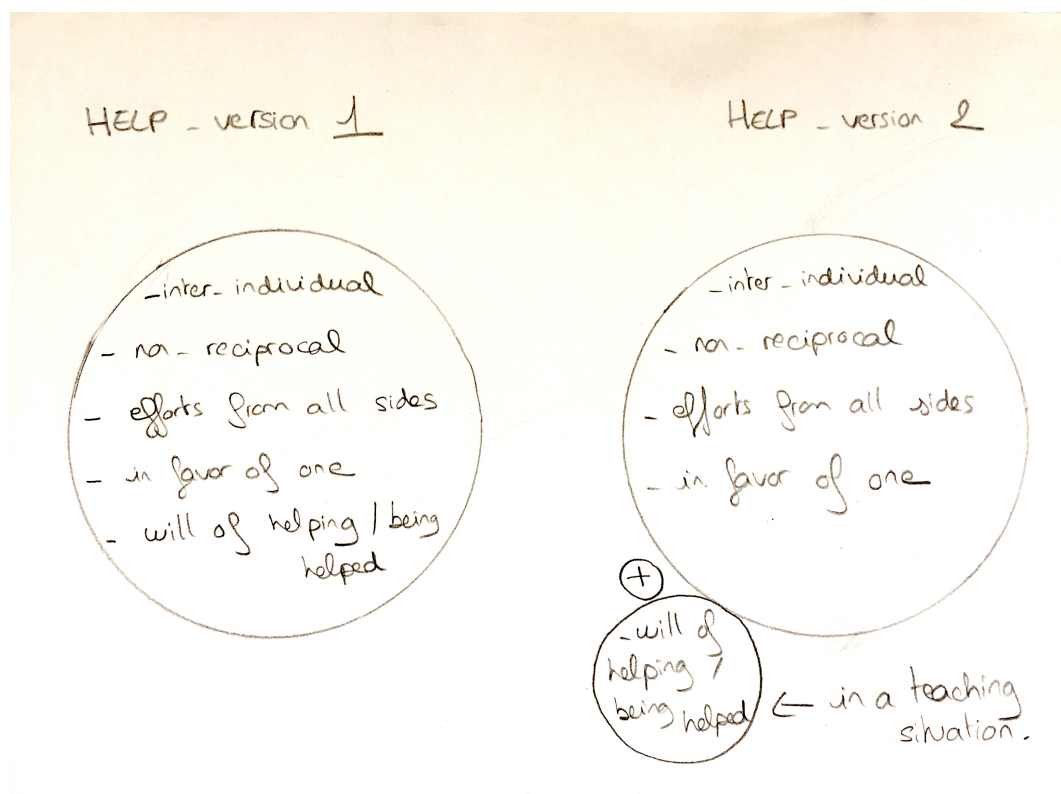
Helping someone to make him/her correspond to an external expectation (the teacher who helps the 6 year old to form letters, to allow the child later to find his/her place in a society that expects adults to know how to write) or helping someone to bring him/her closer to his/her integrity, to who he/she is?

The question of intention:

In order to help someone, does one necessarily have to intend to do so, or is it possible to help without having the intention to do so? The definition we have chosen does not stipulate the necessity of intention.

Let us imagine a situation 1) that involves at least two people, 2) where the roles of these people are not of the same type, 3) where both people make an effort, 4) and that this situation is in favor of one of the two people: according to the definition we have for the moment, this situation reveals a relationship of help, even if no one has had the will to help or to be helped.

Other definitions would include the notion of intention. I decide not to add the notion of intention within the notion of helping, however, since I will be thinking about how a teacher can help a student, I will consider a relationship of help with a willingness to help added to it.



Why do I want to keep the notion of intention, of willingness, as possibly additional but not essential to the notion of helping?

Because I have had personal experiences where I have been helped without the person who helped me having the intention to help me. It would seem to me to go against my experience of life to define help as necessarily intentional.

At this point in the writing, I went out for a walk in the woods of Sylkeborg, it rained a little and it was also sunny. Then I came back to continue writing this text but I had trouble concentrating again, I felt a bit mentally tired, so I made a joke to Johan. I was tempted to go on Facebook but as Johan is working next to me and he can see my screen I decided to continue writing this text.

=> We have now dissected a possible definition of the concept of help, and this dissection has raised some unresolved questions: the question of the criterium for determining whether or not there has been help (whether the action has been in favor of the helped), the question of « help to do what ».

The definitions of teacher and student

I choose not to go into depth about the definitions of teacher and student, not to question them.

Here is the definition of teacher that I consider: a person who is responsible for imparting knowledge (mental or physical) or methods of reasoning (mental or physical) as part of a general or subject-specific education. The teacher can be part of a national institution (the public school; the prison) or a private institution (private schools), or not be part of an institution (in this case the people involved have to agree reciprocally on the symbolic framework: yes you are my teacher in this situation, yes I am your student).

Here is the definition of a student that I consider: a person who receives a transmission of physical or mental knowledge or of physical or mental reasoning methods.

Let's go back to our starting point, that is, to the question that came to me after reading my significant moment: How does a teacher help a student?

The notions of education and training as described in Remen's text will help me think about this question.

Remen differentiates between these two notions: for her, education considers the person who is being educated as a whole, in all the different aspects that make up that person, whereas training selects certain specific competences of the person, and develops them. I quote: "An education evokes wholeness and attends to integrity, while a training specializes, focuses, and narrows us."

It appears that the help given by a teacher in a training cannot be the same kind of help as in an education.

### **In the context of training, what help?**

If we consider, with Remen, that training specializes and narrows us, then as a teacher I help a student by giving him/her the concrete tools to develop a particular skill.

For example, I can have her/him repeat the action of crawling several times so that he/she can crawl with fluidity and efficiency (two qualities of movement that are valued in contemporary dance), or I can give him/her an analysis of the action of crawling ("first you push with your toes, then you pull with your hands, and you use your head in opposition...").

In this case, the notion of training as defined by Remen allows me both to have a criterium to determine if the action was "in favor of" (if the student manages to crawl more fluidly and efficiently) and to answer the question "to help to do what": to acquire a movement skill useful for the practice of contemporary dance.

### **In the context of education, what help?**

If we consider, with Remen, that an education sees us as complete beings, and does not seek to specialize us but to make us grow by taking into account all aspects of our person, then as a teacher I help a student if I am able to bring him/her closer to wholeness. If I am able to go against the phenomenon that creates what Remen calls "cultural wounds", that is, the aspects of ourselves that in our society are despised, or devalued, or shamed.

She says: "Shadow is the wound that a culture inflicts on its people: a diminishing of innate wholeness through a collective judgment or disapproval. Every culture diminishes wholeness in its own way. All people born into a culture find approval for certain aspects of their own wholeness and suffer judgment for certain other aspects. It is only human to trade our wholeness for approval, and share in the collective wound. Some of us are more deeply wounded than others, but no one escapes".

A teacher helps a student by giving value to those aspects of her/him that have been devalued by the dominant culture, by giving him permission to have integrity.

(Here I rely on this passage where she says: "Healing the shadow of a culture may require the formation of a subculture of credible people who value that which has been devalued by the dominant culture. This subculture confers on its participants permission for a greater wholeness and heals them."))

I think that the same discipline can be the object of training or education. In the first case, the expected result is mastery of the discipline, in the second case, the expected result is a more

enlightened practice of the discipline and a strengthened sense of integrity towards oneself during the process.

Let's imagine a world where everyone knows and applies Remen's notions of training and education, and where both teachers and students know what framework they are in, that the underlying paradigm is transparent to everyone.

So, if I am a student and I consciously go to MMA (mixed martial arts) training, I expect my teacher to help me acquire the arm and leg techniques to beat my opponent. I don't expect my teacher to take into account the fact that I have low self-confidence, or that I have trouble concentrating during class. I expect her/him to IGNORE all of these aspects of me.

- I am aware that I am being radical in this statement, and that this position is open to debate-

And so, if I am a student and I wish to follow an MMA education, I expect my teacher to help me stay close to me, to respect me in all my aspects, in learning mixed martial arts. I expect my teacher to TAKE INTO ACCOUNT my lack of self-confidence, my concentration difficulties, my creativity, my relationship with the group...

If I go back to my significant moment: I had decomposed the action of crawling for the students, I had them try this decomposition so that they could feel in their body the logic of this particular way of crawling, then I had asked them to crawl again. When one student told me that despite my explanations, she had not improved her crawling, I hesitated: how could I help her? Do I go up to her and study her movement in front of the whole group, at the risk of making her feel uncomfortable? Or say a sentence that opened up the possibilities in crawling patterns?

The first option (going up to her and studying her movement in front of the whole group, at the risk of making her feel uncomfortable), since I don't know the student, don't know if she is comfortable being the center of attention in a classroom, I could apply it in training. I could ignore a possible aspect of her, focusing on her success in performing the crawling action. This can be counterproductive, if 1) the setting is not clearly a training one and 2) if she gets stuck being the focus of all her classmates.

The second option (saying a sentence that opened up the possibilities in the ways of crawling) seems to me to be more interesting in an educational setting. This option aims to not stigmatize those who do not have / do not understand this task, it aims to make everyone feel accepted, that the class does not split into two groups "those who succeed and those who fail".

**To summarize:** the help a teacher gives to a student does not fit into the same paradigm in the case of training as in the case of education. Helping a student in the case of training requires a willingness to ignore all aspects of the student, while helping a student in the case of education requires a willingness to consider the student as a complete and complex person.

**Does this mean that in education, students are invited to express their voice in all its integrity and specificity? (In this passage, I will use the term "voice" as equivalent to the term "integrity", as "who I am as a whole person, with my values, my ideals, my capacities and incapacities»).**

I share Biesta<sup>2</sup>'s concern, who asks: and what if this integrity, this voice, this specificity is problematic for living together? What if this voice is racist? What if this voice is destructive? Should the teacher still allow it to flourish and exist?

For Biesta, an education must allow students to perform the challenge of existing in the world, that is, to ask the question "how can I remain in dialogue with the world as it is, that is, with the resistances that it inflicts on my desires? ».

Biesta invites educators to show students that their voices must be weighed against the consequences they imply: does their voice imply a hindrance to other integrity (in the case of a racist voice, for example)? Does their voice imply a destruction of the self, a discouragement to exist (in the case of an idealistic and non-realistic integrity for example)?

It is at this price that an education allows students not only to be complete human beings, but to negotiate and evolve their integrity so that it allows them to be in this world where other integrity also exists.

A teacher does not help a student by only allowing them to express their voice in the world, they help them by allowing them to gauge that voice and have it dialogue with the other voices in the world.

To return to my signifying moment, if my class is considered part of an educational setting (and not training), it would not have been helpful if I had said to the student, "crawl in any way you like, even if it means hurting other students in your path". And if it turned out that her way of crawling was to do so by hurting other students in the process, my help would have been to point this out to her, to ask her how she thinks she can move in a world where her integrity involves hurting other integrity, to show her how her life might benefit from an adjustment, a negotiation, between her desires and the reality of the world, and thus to find a slightly different way of crawling.

Note: This does not mean that the teacher will succeed in making the student see the need to take into account other integrities, it simply means that the teacher gives the student tools to do so. As we saw at the beginning, help implies effort on the part of the teacher but also on the part of the student, if the student is not interested in asking "how do I exist in the world, what are the consequences", the teacher cannot force him/her to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Gert Biesta, *Letting art teach*, January 1, 2017 by ArtEZ Press.

