



# Advancing academic ability and creating a constructive class culture via communication

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## Summary

By applying a hermeneutic approach, I challenged my own preconceptions and gained new insights into the educational backgrounds and academic ability of a diverse group of cadets. The new knowledge inspired further dialogue and new exercises that improved learning conditions and created a more constructive class culture.

## Background

As newly employed Assistant Professor at the Royal Danish Defence College, one of my first major tasks was to teach a semester course titled 'Denmark as strategic actor' at the Royal Danish Military Academy. Prior to meeting my cadets, I wondered how they and the class culture would differ from what I have previously experienced at University of Copenhagen, University of Greenland and University of Cambridge where I used to work.

In order to prepare myself, challenge my own preconceptions and, most importantly, to make sure that everyone would learn sufficiently from my teaching, I carried out a project focusing on how to get a better understanding of their professional background and individual academic ability. The main purpose was to use that knowledge to create a comfortable class culture and facilitate better learning conditions.

## A hermeneutic approach

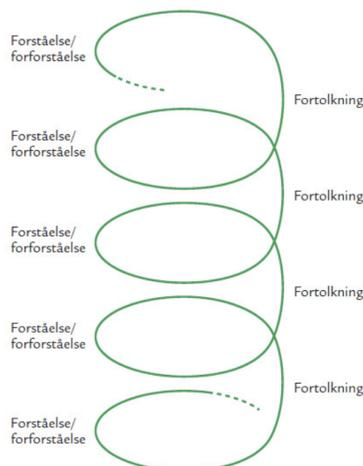
Throughout the project, I have used a hermeneutical approach when striving for a better understanding of the students' academic ability and how to use the newly acquired knowledge to improve learning conditions and create a more comfortable class culture.

More particularly, I have found inspiration in the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' which is a metaphor for the process where a researcher dialectically moves between parts of a text and the whole context with the purpose of achieving a better understanding of a phenomenon (Paterson & Higgs 2005:343). In practice, this means repeatedly moving between parts and the whole in an iterative recontextualization in the aim of transforming one's (pre)conception of something.

Whereas Michael Heidegger (1927) developed the hermeneutic circle to envision a reality (= whole) situated in detailed everyday experiences (= parts), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1981) reconceptualized the concept as an iterative process in which interlocutors together obtain a new understanding through conversation. Gadamer further argued that the circle of interpretation is never closed – and therefore a spiral would be a more accurate illustration – and he emphasized how researchers should acknowledge their biases and preconceptions and put them at stake through the interpretive hermeneutic process. In this regard, he introduced the concept of 'fusing horizons' where an interpreter bridge the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar by fusing a past horizon with a present horizon. This is done through questions, answers and dialogue (Paterson & Higgs 2005:346).

Before meeting the class, my colleagues had told me what I could expect from them. I also knew about the admission requirements and the various professional backgrounds the cadets might have. On this basis, my prejudice reflected the Danish Defence's recruitment campaign targeting primarily natural science and law students as well as school teachers and craftsmen (cf. karriere.forsvaret.dk 2023). What I did not know, however, was how diverse the class in fact was.

**Illustration 1: the hermeneutic spiral**  
By using the hermeneutic approach, I have challenged my own prejudices about the cadets and have subsequently used the new information to adjust my teaching accordingly.



## Three turns to transformation

The turns in my hermeneutic spiral occurred through three different methods that were carried out in the beginning, the middle and towards the end of the semester.

The *first* method was a comprehensive class dialogue where I started by telling about myself in order for the cadets to become more comfortable with me as a teacher and try to plant a seed of trust that would be essential for them to be honest about their academic ability and enhance their tolerance of daring to fail. I believe that these two components would be important in our collective endeavor of obtaining as much knowledge as possible and establish the best possible foundation for the exam and their future careers. Subsequently, I asked the cadets to share what they thought was most important for us to know about them both professionally and personally. As part of this, I asked what they did prior to joining the military academy and why they had chosen to do so. Through this dialogue, I challenged my own preconceptions about the cadets' background and gained an important initial insight into the class culture created throughout their collective education at the military academy.

What was revealed in this first dialogue was that approximately half of the class had built a military career for the past 5-10 years, while the other half had bachelor degrees in, i.a., political science, law, history, architecture and theater science. The notable number of cadets with an academic background in the humanities surprised me, while I noted that no one had been teachers or craftsmen prior to their current career path. As the course's theoretical core is within the study of International Politics, the cadets with a political science background naturally had an advantage. This was reflected in their vocabulary and self-confidence which dominated class discussions from the beginning. I feared that this would have a negative impact on the class culture and limit participation by the cadets with a different or less academic background. Thus, I made a mental note about testing this presumption in the future.

After a few weeks where we had got a better impression of each other and established what seemed to be a good learning environment, it was time for the *second* method. While the first method was qualitative, the second one was quantitative as it consisted of an electronic questionnaire created with Mentimeter. The cadets accessed the questionnaire via their cell phones and anonymously answered the questions as they appeared on the class screen and on their individual phones. The nine questions were divided into three categories with the purpose of 1) Getting their honest feedback on the level and quality of the curriculum and my teaching. 2) Testing how much they actually understood of the obligatory texts, and 3) Asking if there was anything they would like to change or add to the course. As part of these questions, I also asked them to relate their own efforts to that of the general level in the class and how the different academic ability among the cadets had an impact on their respective understanding. Subsequently, we spent 10-15 minutes on additional, non-anonymous, feedback and discussions about how to best proceed with the class in order to offer the opportunity of speaking beyond or nuance the categories suggested in the questionnaire.

**Illustration 2: Mentimeter questionnaire**  
The first slide in my Mentimeter questionnaire. I was not aware that the free version of Mentimeter only allowed me to access the questionnaires for a couple of weeks, so this one is a reconstruction.



**Illustration 3: A lecture at the Royal Danish Military Academy**

Approx. 100 cadets attend each lecture. Subsequently they go to a class of 25 cadets where exercises, discussions and students presentations take place. The main focus in the present TLHEP is the class activity.



What I learnt from this second turn in the hermeneutic spiral was that there was, indeed, a significant difference in their understandings of the texts and class discussions. This was as I expected. What I did not expect, however, was that the cadets with less or no academic background perceived the dominating students as an important resource that helped heightening the general knowledge level in class. On this basis, I introduced two new measures aiming at limiting the gap (cf. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006) between the different groups of cadets: The first was, that I made more active use of the most academically skilled cadets by distributing them between different groups and posing more challenging questions to them in class. The second measure was, that I did more to scaffold their learning by suggesting additional activities between classes. This was especially targeted to the ones that felt insufficiently prepared as their potential extra improvement would both benefit the individual cadet and the class as a whole (cf. Heiner, Banet, & Wieman 2014). The supplementary, non-obligatory, material consisted of short videos and podcasts providing basic understandings of theory and overviews of some of the most important empirical developments that would be central for our next discussions. After the exam, several cadets applauded this initiative as something that had helped them getting a better understanding.

The *third* and last turn in the hermeneutic spiral happened a few weeks before the end of the course when I asked two cadets if I could interview them about their class experiences. One of them had a bachelor in political science while the other had been in the army since high school. During the interviews, structured as dialogues, I asked for their assessments of the different groups in the class and how we could best enhance their academic ability with the purpose of giving everybody a satisfactory exam experience. In response, they i.a. suggested an exercise where I challenged them on key theoretical concepts and offered my ideas on how to prepare the ten minute monologue that each exam would begin with.

Via these interviews, we obtained what could perhaps be called a fusion of horizons where our dialogue offered a bridge between our understandings of what the class would need in order to feel prepared for finishing the course in a satisfactory manner. After the interviews, I asked the class if they agreed to the suggested plan which included that some cadets would be challenged in exercises close to how the exam would unfold. They agreed. By observing each other presenting and being questioned, they were all challenged at their respective levels.

## Conclusion

By using different communication methods, I as a teacher went through three turns to new understanding of the cadets' academic ability. Those new insights both challenged my own preconceptions of who the cadets are and provided valuable information which I used to advance their academic ability via extra exercises and role play. While this approach facilitated better learning conditions it also helped creating a more constructive class culture as exemplified in the two anonymous statements in the speech bubbles to the right.

During the past couple of years, the Danish Defence has not just experienced a greater need for more military material but also a need for more and better human capacity. However, as DoD currently struggles with recruitment and retention (DoD 2021), we need new initiatives to make a military career more attractive. One element in such a "campaign" could be to soften the class culture and encourage more dialogue to better mirror the surrounding society. This TLHEP project could assist that aim.

**Illustration 4: Two examples of feedback via course evaluation**

In the obligatory course evaluation, some (anonymous) cadets also evaluated how teaching in their respective classes had been carried out. This was valuable feedback on my style of teaching and the thoughts shared in the present TLHEP.

*Generally, I would like to praise the class teacher (Marc) for his approach to teaching. He has managed to navigate a path where he addressed possible pitfalls in the theory and optimized the original plan. This has resulted in people getting more out of the theory/text and feeling more at home with the material. It may have meant slightly fewer complete individual presentations, but people can manage that.*  
- Anonymous cadet 1

*Marc (class teacher PAM2) has been very skilled at involving the students and, with his pragmatic approach, optimized the output for teaching, thereby creating maximum understanding of the covered theories and material. He achieved this by asking the class, before learning activities, what we needed in order to create the greatest possible understanding of the subject.*  
- Anonymous cadet 2

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