

Zum Nacherfinden. Konzepte und Materialien für Unterricht und Lehre

## Students Explore the ‘Art of Living’

### Empirical Perspectives on a Philosophical Matter

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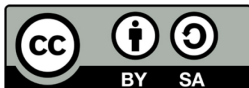
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**Abstract:** This article explores the intrinsic relationship between education and its ultimate goal of empowering individuals to actively shape their own lives, focusing on the philosophical concept of the ‘art of living’ (German: *Lebenskunst*) by Wilhelm Schmid. The course, conducted at Bielefeld University, aims to integrate educational philosophy with practical skills, highlighting how education can contribute to personal development and life reflection. Using qualitative interviews, students engage with the ‘art of living’ concept, fostering methodological, language, and intercultural skills. Despite challenges, the course provides a reflective space for understanding life’s complexities, emphasizing education’s role in nurturing resilient, self-determined individuals, especially during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** art of living; qualitative research; student research; reflection; philosophy in teaching

## 1 Introduction

Education always operates with ends in mind (for a comprehensive overview, cf. Osberg & Biesta, 2010). Some of these ends are comparatively straight forward, as medical students train and study to become better at saving lives and keeping people healthy. The ends of other disciplines – i.e. literature, the humanities, or philosophy – are less specific or obvious, yet they are present. This course concept aims at shedding light on the relationship between education<sup>1</sup> and its end of developing people’s ability to actively shape their own lives. This relationship is highlighted here by focusing on the philosophical concept of the ‘art of living’ (German: *Lebenskunst*). The art of living was developed by contemporary philosopher Wilhelm Schmid (2015) and focuses on the contributions an individual – e.g. through reflection, action, different arrangements of responsibility, etc. – can make to shape their own life (for an overview, see chapter 4). More specifically, this course concept, as well as the associated research, focuses on the contribution education can make in order to enable people to develop their own art of living (cf. Teschers, 2013) – an aspect often forgotten in modern approaches to education (cf. Neuhaus & Jacobsen, 2022; Neuhaus et al., 2021; Vogt & Neuhaus, 2021). As such, this course concept zooms in on the fundamental enmeshment of education, moral education (cf. Schuitema et al., 2008), values (cf. Hohmann & Neuhaus, 2022) and a philosophy of life. Taking this intersection as a starting point, this course has multiple aims and fosters a range of competences and

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<sup>1</sup> Here we refer to education in general but also to the subject of ‘education’ (German: *Erziehungswissenschaft, Bildungswissenschaft*).

skills (see chapter 4), yet two aims could be considered key: (1) Understanding how education has positively influenced the lives of others and which idiosyncratic dynamics have been at play in individual cases, and (2) initiating a reflection regarding one's own life path, education, and the intermingling of the two. As a method to foster these competences and reflections, the course exposes students to research approaches in education and scaffolds them to conduct semi-structured interviews focusing on the interplay of education and the art of living. While the interview and transcription process conducted by the students has grown their understanding of research methodologies in education and supported their personal reflection of the relationship between education and the development of a 'good and beautiful life' (cf. Teschers, 2013), the interviews themselves have been added to the courses' interview corpus which laid the foundation for further analysis, reflection, and discussion for students and researchers.

In the following, the experiences and observations of this teaching endeavor will be sketched out and reflected on. Therefore, this paper follows a four-fold structure: Firstly, a didactical comment (chapter 2) – outlining the institutional arrangements as well as the learners' group – will precede the actual material (chapter 3). The 'material' in this teaching project should be considered the course's structure as indicated above, which will be illustrated in Figure 1. Following the material section, the theoretical background of the project – i.e. the taught content as well as the mode of transmission – will be illustrated (chapter 4). The paper ends with a short overview of personal experiences (the teaching side), the course's evaluation (the student perspective) as well as an overall reflection (chapter 5).

## 2 Didactical Comment

The course,<sup>2</sup> as it will be sketched out in the section *Material*, took place in the winter semester 2021/22 and had an attendance of 18 students. The seminar was part of the bachelor's program *Erziehungswissenschaft* at Bielefeld University; therefore, all enrolled students were bachelor students at the

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<sup>2</sup> The course has been supported by a generous fund stemming from 'Qualitätsfond für die Lehre' issued by Bielefeld University's 'Zentrum für Lehre und Lernen (ZLL)'. The poster presented at the ZLL's final workshop can be downloaded here: [https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/einrichtungen/zll/hdle/qualitaetsfonds/foerderung/QF\\_NeuhausVogt\\_2021.pdf](https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/einrichtungen/zll/hdle/qualitaetsfonds/foerderung/QF_NeuhausVogt_2021.pdf)

time.<sup>3</sup> The course itself consisted of 15 sessions, of which four were held asynchronously and ten took place in a synchronous seminar group. Due to the Covid-19 situation during the winter semester 2021/22, the ten synchronous course occurrences were held online via Zoom®. All sessions have been conducted by the course's instructor, Till Neuhaus; however, for selected session – primarily the ones about the introduction of the questionnaire employed to interview people about their 'art of living', as well as the sessions regarding analysis and interpretation of the results –, the initiator and leader of the 'education for an art of living'<sup>4</sup> network, Christoph Teschers, was brought into the seminar as well. As stated, while ten sessions took place synchronously online, four sessions were realized in asynchronous form, using forums on the university's online course platform, in order to provide time and space to conduct the interviews in question, transcribe them, and enable the process of in-depth analysis and reflection. In addition to these, one session offered a talk by bestselling author and key philosopher of the 'art of living', Wilhelm Schmid. For this event, Wilhelm Schmid came to Bielefeld and delivered a public talk<sup>5</sup> (again, broadcasted online as well as in person). Therefore, this specific session took place outside the regular course schedule. Apart from delivering a presentation in Bielefeld, Wilhelm Schmid has also been interviewed by Christoph Teschers, Michaela Vogt, and Till Neuhaus. These discussions resulted in two recorded interviews, entitled 'Kamingespräche', which have been uploaded into the digital realm, and which can be considered a permanent as well as open educational resource (see: <https://aol-education.org/videos/>). The 'Kamingespräche' have also been employed as a prompt in the seminar for one of the asynchronous sessions.

With the exception of Schmid's talk, all seminar sessions have been delivered in English in line with the internationalization efforts at Bielefeld University. As indicated, the course was co-delivered by course instructor Till Neuhaus

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<sup>3</sup> The student population can be differentiated between students pursuing a bachelor's degree in *Erziehungswissenschaft* and those who aim at a teaching career. Also, there was one student from outside these two domains.

<sup>4</sup> One stated goal of the art of living network is the analysis and comparison of concepts circling around the idea of 'living a good life'. Therefore, the art of living network carries out research in four countries (New Zealand, Germany, Australia, and Colombia) trying to understand what 'living a good life' encompasses in these geographies. For an overview on members, activities, and outputs, see <https://aol-education.org>.

<sup>5</sup> The event has also been covered by the regional newspaper *Westfalenblatt* (see: <https://www.westfalen-blatt.de/owl/zum-lernen-braucht-es-beziehungen-2518802?pid=true>).

(Bielefeld University) and Christoph Teschers (University of Canterbury, New Zealand). The following section will provide more details to the course structure and delivery.

### 3 Material

The here presented material consists of two parts: firstly, a schedule briefly outlining the structure as well as temporal and modal arrangements of the course. This part will be displayed in the chart illustrated below in Figure 1. The second part of the material in question are the interview guidelines structuring the interviews conducted by the students. These can be downloaded as an online-supplement. Obviously, the course sessions were supported by appropriate literature, course readings and synchronous or recorded lectures to support students' learning and understanding of the topics at hand.

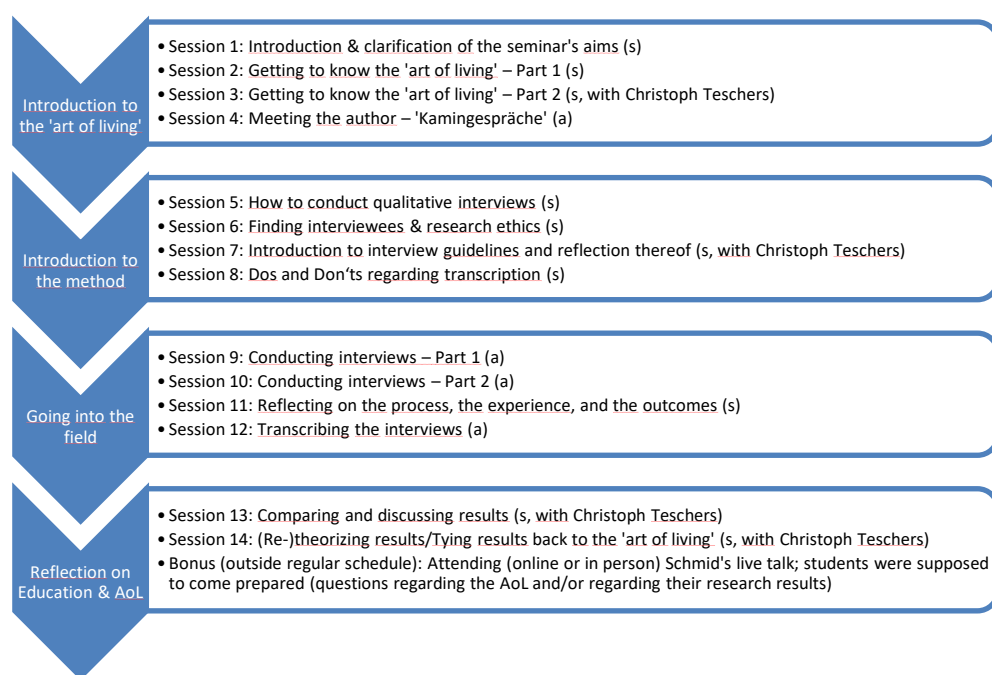


Figure 1: Course Syllabus (own description)

### 4 Theoretical Background

After having outlined the course's structure and aims as well as having presented the interview guidelines (attached online to this article), we turn now to the theoretical presuppositions of the teaching endeavor. This discussion consists of two parts, which differ in scope and abstraction. The first section will focus on a discussion of the course's content and how it ties back to larger patterns and themes of educational philosophy and research at large. The

second section will primarily consist of a reflection regarding the mode of teaching to shed light on which theories and approaches have – at least in part – guided this teaching endeavor and which (meta-)skills have been fostered.

#### 4.1 Content

The art of living (German: *Lebenskunst*) describes an idea developed by contemporary philosopher Wilhelm Schmid and which is supposed to contribute to “[o]ne of philosophy’s oldest and most central questions” (Neuhaus, 2021, p. 112), namely how to conduct oneself in life in order to have lived a good life (cf. Vogt & Neuhaus, 2021). Schmid’s approach (2000) places the locus of responsibility on the individual who is responsible for his or her life. This being said, the art of living ultimately focuses on what Schmid has coined ‘a beautiful life’ (German: *schönes Leben*) for which the individual, just like an artist, takes responsibility. The focus on beauty allows for two adjustments regarding the philosophical concept: (1) beauty is a highly subjective category and thereby (primarily) adheres to an individual’s standards and judgement; (2) beauty does not equate ‘nice’, thereby a beautiful life can consist of suffering, loss, or defeat and can still – based on the individual’s judgement – qualify as beautiful. As such, a truly encompassing evaluation of one’s life, according to Schmid’s philosophy, can, strictly speaking, only take place at the end of life. However, Schmid contends that it is possible to take stock by taking a ‘step back’ from one’s life in any given moment and reflect on one’s past actions and the trajectory of one’s life, which allows reflection on one’s own norms, values, and beliefs and if one’s actions and trajectory aligns with these. This also implies that the art of living is an on-going and life-long process rather than a singular and isolated event or action (cf. Teschers, 2015). In this context, Teschers argues that the art of living and education should be considered synergetic in nature (cf. Teschers, 2013, 2017) as education is often considered a process which is supposed to enable children and young adults to live a self-determined, active, productive, and responsible life.

Despite being relatively subjective in nature, Schmid (2000) outlines some general principles that can help individuals to develop their own art of living. One such orienting principle – fostering a deeper understanding of life but also the development of an art of living – is the focus on interrelations or interconnections in life. These interrelations encompass profane aspects in the engagement with the material world (What happens when I ignite the engine of my car?) as well as more complex interrelations on the social (How does it change my relationship to X if I pick him/her/them up with my car?) and

global scale (What does it do to the world if I use my car for every trip?). As hinted at with the car example, individual actions have to be considered in relation to one's reflected personal norms, values and beliefs to support an authentic conduct of life. At times, it may be useful or even necessary to act with a rather short temporal horizon as well as single-mindedly (i.e. using the car to rush a family member in need to the emergency room) whereas at other times alternative approaches should be favored. Ultimately, these decisions can only be made on the individual level, yet in order to strive towards an art of living, Schmid (2015) suggests that a continual reflection of one's actions and habits is key. In short: The art of living requires honest self-reflection from each person striving towards it, but it also allows for errors and mistakes; its aim is not perfection but rather the continuous and conscious (re-)adjustment of oneself towards the aims and values one holds dear. Of course, such an approach also allows for a re-adjustment regarding personal aims and larger goals in life.

Despite focusing heavily on individual norms and understandings of beauty, the art of living is not completely idiosyncratic as most people striving for an art of living come to the realization that

“a beautiful life for oneself is more likely in an environment that allows for the development of an art of living and pursuit of a beautiful life for everyone. As such, Schmid's ethical approach sees each person engaged in their own art of living, informed by prudence and practical wisdom and based on care for oneself, to develop care for others, society, and our living environment that is our planet. Based on this ethics of practical wisdom, a person engaged in the art of living will have to ask themselves if what they desire is actually desirable for themselves, others and the world” (Teschers et al., 2024, p. 877).

By employing the concept of ‘enlightened self-interest’ (a transformation of narcissistic egoism through practical wisdom into a considered form of self-interest as part of the world), the art of living requires constant reflection – and, if necessary, adjustment – of oneself, one's aims and values, as well as one's interactions with the outside world. As outlined by Teschers (2018), the development of an art of living can be considered compatible with aims and ideas of education and pedagogy. In fact, schools are supposed to be places fostering the development of a philosophy of life and, at least in part, elicit processes addressing the larger questions in life (Who do I want to be? What do I want to do with my life? etc.). By addressing these questions, young adults not just develop a vision for their life, but also begin to take responsibility (for themselves, others, and the world), resulting in a higher degree of perceived meaning (cf. Neuhaus & Vogt, 2022; Peterson, 2002). Lastly, it

should be considered that the nexus consisting of responsibility and meaning is arguably the one thing which protects oneself in times of misery. The importance of this line of thinking cannot be overstated as Viktor Frankl, a famous psychologist and holocaust survivor, “highlighted Nietzsche’s (1968) epigram [If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how] [...] when he discussed what kept him alive under extreme suffering” (Li et al., 2021, n.p.). Given the fact that one day each and every one of us will face adverse events, one key task of education has always been to prepare students for these circumstances. One such preparation is most certainly the development of an art of living and a continuous reflection of what gives meaning to one’s own life. These processes contribute to the development of settled and resilient individuals as well as strong and resilient personalities, even in times of crisis.

## 4.2 Mode

In the second section discussing theoretical backgrounds of the course, the mode of teaching as well as its underlying presuppositions will be discussed. This will be done by focusing on three skills – (1) methodological knowledge and experience regarding qualitative interviews, (2) language skills, as well as (3) intercultural skills – this seminar tried to foster in students. It will be attempted to briefly outline the theoretical underpinnings, as well as demarcating them from related concepts, and then to connect these theoretical accounts with the practical work carried out in the seminar.

Regarding the teaching of methods (in this case: qualitative interviews), the course design has been informed by the findings of Lewthwaite and Nind (2016, p. 420) who identified three central tenets for the successful teaching and acquisition of competence in the field of methods:

“[F]irstly to the importance of making research visible – connecting learners to a world of methods through active engagement with methods; secondly to perspectives and approaches concerned with learning through the experience of conducting research; and finally to approaches that encourage reflection on research practice.”

In order to incorporate these findings into the seminar presented here, we initiated active engagement regarding methods through scaffolded reflection and discussion (Sessions 6, 7, and 8). Further, a key part of the seminar – namely Sessions 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 – consisted of conducting own research, reflecting on the process, as well as discussing the generated findings. Thereby, students went through the entire process of applying the method in

question from start to finish. Simultaneously, a protected space – that means, free from immediate evaluation – was employed with the aim of encouraging students to enhance their methodological knowledge and skills without having to worry about assessment pressures. Lastly, the aspect of reflecting on research practice has been incorporated at multiple instances (Sessions 6, 7, 11, and 13), yet with differing focuses – depending on the specific stage of the process.

Regarding language, the second central skill being fostered in this seminar, a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach has been employed. CLIL is characterized by using “a foreign language as a medium for meaningful communication of specific content under natural condition” (Hanesová, 2014, p. 34). The apparent upside of such an approach is that students do not just make progress regarding the course’s content but simultaneously get exposure and practice in a foreign language. Given the fact that language production, especially verbal conversation, is highly dependent on practice as well as the activation of the associated cognitive structures (namely the gap between active and passive vocabulary, cf. Fan, 2000), the here presented course aimed to provide opportunities to enhance student engagement with the English language, as the course was completely held in English.

The last skill or competence being fostered by the here discussed seminar can be located in the realm of intercultural awareness. However, this aspect requires a bit of contextualization as the terminology as well as the underlying concepts are not clearly demarcated from one another. Firstly, we would argue that the seminar can be characterized as “cross-border activities” (Buckner, 2019, p. 317). This conclusion can be drawn as academics from two universities from different countries are involved in this teaching project but also because the results of the student research is brought into a larger research context, including research data and findings from three countries: Germany, New Zealand, and Colombia. Apart from being border-crossing, the seminar also features a certain understanding of internationalization, namely one which is “less focused on mobility and less economically driven, [yet] with the goal to enhance the quality of education and research and make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit, 2019, p. 13). As stated in the course’s outline, there is no ambition to foster student mobility of sorts but primarily employing international cooperation to improve research, teaching, as well as philosophical insight – three facets which are inherently interwoven in this endeavor. Lastly, intercultural awareness is fostered in this seminar by addressing students’ attitudes and worldviews; drawing from research carried out by Leung et al. (2014), three domains of intercultural learning can be

differentiated: (1) *intercultural traits* defined as psychological traits and personality outfit being best suited for intercultural projects and endeavors, (2) *attitudes and worldview* understood as “sophisticated, [...], construals of cultural differences and similarities” (Leung et al., 2014, p. 491) as well as (3) *intercultural capabilities* read as skills in intercultural interactions. Given this differentiation, the here presented course concept addresses primarily the second dimension, as difference as well as similarities are actively being sought and compared between regions and countries.

As outlined in the prior paragraphs, the selected mode in which the course was conducted aimed at improvement in the following realms:

- Methodological knowledge as well as experience with a select scientific method.
- Fostering of language skills by active engagement in a given academic context.
- The transmission of knowledge as well as reflection of empirical research on a selected facet of educational philosophy; additionally, chances were provided to reflect on findings in sophisticated (i.e. with the academic founding father of the ‘art of living’) as well as international comparative contexts.
- Improvement regarding the intercultural domains, as the teaching endeavor was not just border crossing or research initiating but also actively focused on similarities as well as differences in the given cultures, thereby fostering a process which could be entitled as “learning to see” (Vogt et al., 2024a, 2024b).

## 5 Student Experience, Personal Experience, and Concluding Thoughts

The following section will split into three sub-areas: (1) student experiences as feedbacked in the teaching evaluation, (2) personal experience teaching the course as well as (3) a concluding reflection regarding the teaching project.

### 5.1 Student experience

Student feedback has, overall, been very positive. Despite being limited – due to the Covid-19 pandemic – to the online realm, students reported a relatively expansive involvement and engagement with the course which many ascribe to the course’s content. The written feedback is of particular interest in this

case as ten out of 18 students participated in the feedback and eight out of these ten used the written feedback format (the other two only crossed preformed checkboxes). Within these written feedbacks two overarching motives can be identified: firstly, the students' appreciation of being introduced to a research method and having had the possibility to try it out in a sheltered (read as: not overly important in terms of grading) space. Some students reported that they plan to employ interviews for future academic endeavors, such as bachelor's theses or term papers; others stated that they now feel more comfortable considering an empirically-oriented setting, such as courses, internships, or student jobs. The second overarching aim which has also contributed to the positive feedback addresses the course's content dimension. The discussion of values, the art of living, the role of education, and life pathways (as well as reflection thereof) made – at least for some students – a forgotten relationship explicit, visible, and thereby intellectually addressable. In this context, the link between philosophical concepts and empirical findings has also been described as valuable and beneficial regarding individual reflection. Surprisingly, the course's international orientation – the course was conducted in English and featured a lecturer from another university – has not been considered explicitly in the evaluation, apart from the fact that English as the working language has neither affected the course's flow nor the learning outcome of the seminar. It can be argued that, following the CLIL framework, students have been so focused on the content that language – despite being trained and competences being fostered – become secondary.

## 5.2 Personal Experience

From the perspective of the course instructor, this course was challenging on multiple levels. Firstly, the course's breadth can be perceived by some as overwhelming as one is engaged regarding content (in this case, the art of living), methods (semi-structured interviews), empirical material and its assessment in class, language issues, as well as a comparatively deep reflective notion. Secondly, the course offers possibilities for real-life examples and life stories from course participants but also interviewees. These stories and experiences can, as one can easily imagine, be trauma-ridden or feature very serious, and at times dark, content, such as experiences or phases of addiction, stories of bereavement, or illness. A key challenge of this course has been to provide enough space for these stories but also providing a proper (read as: recognizing without judging) frame for them. For this challenge no real blueprint can be created and the success or failure of these sessions heavily depends on the instructor's intuition. Thirdly, the course requires some tolerance

of uncertainty and ambiguity. As said, especially regarding the empirical material a certain degree of uncertainty has always been present in the (online) seminar room; however, personally I found it incredibly rewarding to endure this uncertainty as well as the inherent seriousness of some of the interview material, as almost all stories highlighted the human capacity to overcome misery. Speaking with Schmid, the interviewees have been able to consider their own art of living and pursuit of a beautiful life.

From the position as co-teacher from an overseas university, the course was both rewarding and challenging. Due to time zone differences, engaging with students synchronously included night Zoom sessions in addition to a busy daytime workday. The asynchronous parts that allowed engagement with students' forum contributions during normal working hours helped significantly in this context. The rewarding aspects included seeing a deep engagement of students with key educational questions, such as what the purpose(s) of education are, how people's personal life pathways, through the philosophy of the art of living, links with education and schooling, and the insights students seemingly gained by engaging in the interviews and reflecting both on the process and the content, as became apparent in their written reflections. It needs to be mentioned that ethics approval for the research component for this course was obtained which included considerations for students' safety and well-being during the interview phase.

### 5.3 Concluding thoughts

While most seminar instructors would probably see Covid-19 as a major challenge for successful teaching and learning, we conclude that this course in particular could not have happened at a better point in time. The reason for that is simple: if everything in life works perfectly, no explicit reflection on one's life philosophy is required. However, when things go out of place and actual challenges arise, one – if not already equipped with a philosophy – is challenged to develop a philosophy or adopts one relatively quickly. Generally speaking, German university students and course instructors belong to a very well protected and privileged group, which, given normal circumstances, is not often challenged to reflect on their personal life's philosophy. Covid-19 did not affect all people equally; however, through lockdowns, restrictions, stress, and fear, it definitely gave all groups of society at least a taste of a less fortunate life. In such times, the necessity for a personal life philosophy became more explicit and we hope that the course on the art of living helped some students to strive to develop their own art of living.

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## Information on the article

### Quotation:

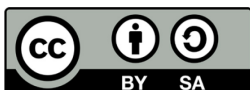
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