

Endings or Openings? Graduating or Launching?

by

Rüdiger Iwan

Translated by Karin DiGiacomo

A few years ago I found an article by Bruno Sandkühler, teacher at the Michael Bauer School in Stuttgart, Germany, in which he argued against graduation at the end of the twelfth grade. He undoubtedly made an excellent argument. However, the printing press imp played a trick on him in one place. Sandkühler demanded, “. . . in the future, each school must have its own Abschlüsse [This typing error changes the meaning of the German word “Abschlüsse,” which means graduations, to signify “launchings” as in launching a missile.] It evokes the image of students shooting out into life. However the contrasting term “Abschlüsse,” meaning “graduations” or “endings,” is equally ill-fitting, and the question really is what should we be dealing with – maybe we should talk about openings. This play on words may indicate that we should change the final exams leading to graduation into an examination process which is commensurate with the individual development of the student. We teachers are all-too familiar with these exams and have in vain been hoping for their demise. [The German graduation called the “Abitur” is earned by passing a huge battery of written and verbal tests in which the student has to prove his/her knowledge of all subject areas which he/she studied during the entire senior year. These tests extend over several weeks and are usually experienced as a great burden to teachers and students alike.]

A small number of schools are already making efforts in that direction. The Freie Waldorfschule in Backnang, for example, has taken this question as the starting point for designing its high school curricula. At the Freie Waldorfschule in Potsdam the director, Thilo Koch, is actually working with the public education department on this question. I will now cite a few examples of the situation in Schwäbisch Hall, the school where I teach.

Examination without fear

Three years ago we collected in a folder for each student some selected pieces of ninth grade work, which had been created during the school year. At the end of the school year the students were asked to present to the teachers what they had achieved and assembled as bodies of work in lieu of examinations. Although the students had been apprised of this presentation

at the beginning of the school year, they were surprised that now the time of the presentation approached in earnest. During this first year the content of the folders was not at the level of excellence that we had wished for, so we added the request that in addition to presenting the work contained in the folder of that year, the students should choose something that they had learned and could add to the presentation. On the day of the presentation exam the students were very excited. They went into the presentation, met the task and afterwards felt very relieved. The important thing to note is that they were not afraid. This is really an essential observation. The mood resembled that of an artistic presentation and was free of the usual fearful atmosphere experienced during graduation exams. The director of the school told us about his own son who came home after this presentation/exam, enthusiastically shared his experience at the dinner table and then began to dance around the living room. The refrain he sang during his dance was, "Exams are cool, exams are neat . . ." He was just happy that he had been allowed to inform his teachers and share his knowledge for half an hour.

We teachers also prepared for the presentations. That is something like an in-house education. For example, for one of these exams, I worked together with the needlework teacher of our school. My colleague felt she was unfit to participate in this task. "Hey, I can't do this!" and I replied as consistently, "Oh, yes, you can!" I mention this to illustrate how we in Schwäbisch Hall do the human resource work necessary to meet the challenge. Well, she finally did her part and did it excellently.

I still remember one student in particular. She was very gifted musically and artistically; she got up in the second part of the presentation, walked up to the blackboard and declared to our great surprise, "I will now explain the Otto-Motor." It was really startling to hear her say that. My colleague and I posed a lot of questions to her, especially since we both did not sufficiently remember from our own school time what we had learned about the functioning of the apparatus that she sketched on the blackboard. Another highly gifted young lady, during her presentation remarked, "Now really, Mr. Iwan, you have just asked questions whose answers you didn't know yourself. That's really rather strange." To which I countered, "And how do you think I like exams for which I know all the answers ahead of time? What good would it be if I expanded each of the student's answers into a lecture of my own?" "Boring?" – "Exactly!" – "Then it was more interesting for you this time," she reflected.

At this point we broke through the paradigm of objective knowledge. When we make that change, we as teachers can face a problem: We lose control. But what we gain as teachers is honesty in one's own questioning attitude and the authenticity of the interaction.

Questioning one's own questions

The following year we asked our colleagues to design their teaching approach in such a way that it would be possible for the students to pick a

topic from the subject areas offered by the teacher in class and go into more depth with it independently. We are calling this principle “integrated annual presentation.” This annual presentation has the disadvantage of being done outside of the usual instruction in class. We have integrated it into this instruction. That changes quite a few things. One needs, for example, time to suggest and implement something like that. It changes our way of teaching, our attitude towards homework and classroom work. Everything starts to come into motion and impacts the structure of teaching and one’s own understanding of what teaching really is.

I would like to present a passage from a work resulting from this process. It expresses a new quality. A student had decided to more closely explore a court case, which she was studying in conjunction with a block about the era of Goethe and Schiller. She had very thoroughly researched the case and written an extensive report about it. Following the teacher’s suggestion to take a candid look at her own project, she wrote in her afterword: “I find and found the project very interesting. But I ask myself: Where does my interest in this lie? I couldn’t find the answer to that question until I really got clear on what all it would take to steal from one’s own grandfather.” And in summation she remarked, “I am interested not only in what someone does, but also why it was done.” In reviewing her own work, the student deepened her interest in the subject matter. In evaluating the school year, she said that she had learned to track a historical era from the beginning by questioning her own questions.

In this brief article I can only point in the direction of this new culture of learning and of exams, which is oriented towards the individual development of the student. This new approach no longer follows the old one-size-fits-all policy of public education. I can guarantee you that many of our students today, experiencing this new approach, will be able to assess the difference between the old and the new forms and will be even better prepared to pass through the final exam period than the generations before them.

All of this has been developed in cooperation with Felix Winter at the High School Forum in Bielefeld, Germany. Efforts like these have also been underway for several years in many other places. The Perpetuum Novile Schulprojekt Gesellschaft founded an international work forum in cooperation with the High School Forum in Bielefeld. Representatives from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have joined in this circle; they come from schools, colleges and from the business sector, and all of them are working in theory and practice on developing these new forms of teaching and testing. This process helps to perpetually individualize the culture of learning in our schools by changing the form how exams are formatted and handled.¹

For Waldorf schools that can translate into a format that at graduation time allows the treasures gathered during the school year to be proudly displayed in a presentation instead of being ignored and lost.

Parents as allies in the campaign towards a new culture of learning

At the end of this past school year in Schwäbisch Hall, we had the impression that the emerging portfolio, containing the work of the entire year, was addressed not only to the teachers but also to the parents. So we organized a joint student-parent-teacher evening event. The portfolios are out on display at the beginning of the event. After reviewing the school year we asked the parents to each choose a folder and have that student articulate its contents. So students and parents engaged for half an hour in animated conversation that actually deepened an appreciation of the last year's work; the participants felt unanimously that this event was positive and supportive.

A few days ago during an evening with the new eighth grade parents, we heard many concerned comments about the approaching high school years. It was not the first time they voiced such concerns. "Wasn't there some danger that there would not be enough guidance?" "Wouldn't the students fall into a black hole that they would only emerge from right before the final presentations?"

Those parents who had already participated in the new format and witnessed the new developments countered, "That wouldn't happen in the classes based on the portfolios process. In those classes an orientation process was slowly but surely set in motion, which would benefit the students way beyond graduation time." The experienced parents became the ambassadors of our school's new culture of learning. As we continue to strengthen such experiences and we find that the parents are our best allies in this campaign.

Endnote:

1. See: Themenheft "Noten, Zeugnisse, Prüfungen – ohne Alternative?" *Erziehungskunst* Heft, March 2002 "Grades, Reports, Exams – Without Alternative?"

About the author:

Rüdiger Iwan, born 1955, works as a high-school level teacher in Schwäbisch Hall, covering the subjects of German, history, and drama. He counsels students in the development of the high school concepts and is the director of the non-profit LLC Perpetuum Novile Schulprojekt.