Evaluating, Judging, Testing, and Learning

by

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For as long as schools have existed – in the sense that we understand them today – one of the teacher's main tasks has been to observe, evaluate, judge and classify the work of their students. Here the problems of the pedagogical task begins. Children and young people want to learn on their own initiative, and in a very individual manner. To test and provide documentary evidence of this is very complex. One thing experienced educators can agree upon: the learning process can be encouraged by pedagogy but can never be caused or steered by it. It is the child him/herself who learns. This can be said more radically: the only thing we humans can really do on our own is learn.

It is, therefore, important in school to raise the question of what the judgment and evaluation of the learning process should look like. Should learning processes be individual or merely reduced to a measurable cognitive level? We know that large school systems, mostly those of the state, are dependent on productivity and economic success and have developed standardized measuring systems so as to be able to provide an 'objective' evaluation of school work. As comparability with other measurement systems is demanded, the present age of globalization demands a formalized method of analysis and an international evaluation system.[1] Here and there, however, with the introduction of portfolios and personal full-year projects, movement in the direction of individualized evaluation has begun to appear.

The interface of the Waldorf school

The Waldorf school has been confronted with these problems from the very beginning, especially with regard to pupils who leave the school in order to continue their education at other schools. Before the final school-leaving, the continuous overall evaluation of the pupil is sufficiently adequate (certificates, intermediate reports, parents' meetings, quarterly assemblies, individual discussions, etc.). It is, of course, expected that the school-leavers must be able to provide documentary evidence of their school work/level of knowledge/competence in order to continue their education. An important

interface in this connection is the end of pupil's time at school, upon finishing the twelfth grade. If the Waldorf school-leavers are not to be discriminated against and permanently put at a disadvantage, adaptations to the different national educational systems are indispensable. It is also advisable to regulate access to institutions of further education to the benefit of the pupils, as long as due reforms of European universities have not yet created new possibilities[2] or have regulated the equivalence of a recognized Waldorf school-leaving certificate. Apart from this, however, the question of the assessment of the pupil's real and individual school work remains open, and this question preoccupies not only the young people and their teachers but also the European community at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[3] Not only what has been learned is important but also how well it is retained.

How does the student learn?

How a pupil learns also depends in part on the quality of the instruction. According to Rudolf Steiner, one of the golden rules of education is the teacher's daily reflecting backwards at what took place during that day's lesson. The teacher's observation is sharpened by his/her basic exercise of separating the important from the unimportant, the essential from the inessential. This is how a sense for quality and its optimization is created. In this way the teacher truly grasps how his students have taken up, understood, and processed the material of the instruction. The teacher himself begins a learning process in the evaluation of the student's school work and receives in practice a concrete feeling for the reliability of the learning student and what he can expect from the student. This result of reflection is decisive for continuous evaluation. In the science of education, reflecting back is merely described as a form of 'taking stock.' So as to be able to measure the quality of the instruction objectively, a number of criteria have been carefully worked out: the learning climate, the effectiveness of what happens during the lesson, and the significance of the overall lesson plan. From this it can be deduced what is necessary in order to satisfy the student's will to learn.

Empirical studies have shown how fundamentally different each student's learning process is at different age levels. Moreover, pupils learn in quite different manners: some learn step by step, building up logically on what has already been treated – and all intermediate steps are decisive – while others learn intuitively; they have an overview of the subject and at the same time grasp its meaning. The teacher encounters these contrasting learning processes every day. There are even some pupils who change from one type of learning process to the other.

How do we evaluate the results?

Do we evaluate by the measurable facts and/or is it the student's 'soft facts' such as personal application, how he/she has come to the results and how he/she has arranged the facts in the context, his/her interest in these facts, the permanence of what has been learned? It is more rational to judge

formally only facts – only testing for knowledge (past-oriented evaluation). Steiner explains the difference between knowledge and understanding and points out that the growing person needs understanding if he is to learn from life. “Life itself, however, is the greatest school, and one leaves school rightly only when he brings out of it the ability to learn from life his whole life long.” [4]

How does the teacher teach?

Empirical studies have analyzed the possible forms of instruction and evaluated their efficiency. Learning techniques are instruments of a scientific character which focus on measurable results and which can and are intended to classify them.[5] These didactic means are stimulating as long as they do not end up in a system and become routine. The pupil is always in a unique learning situation and needs the full didactic availability and openness of his teacher. The uniqueness of his developing willingness to learn demands to be recognized, if it is to be able to grow. This anthropological law is one of the new social requirements of the present age.

Fluctuations in learning are dependent on age and character, and here imponderables often play a role. Not only is an individualized dialectic necessary, but a grasp of the ‘here-and-now’ of the learning process can work wonders. In order to characterize this better, I would like to make a analogy to modern aesthetics.

Why has it become so demanding and difficult today to evaluate a work of art? In his book on the philosophy of art of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin radically challenged the great systems of aesthetic evaluation (of Plato, Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Lukacs, Heidegger). He found that numerous reproductions of works of art modify the original, that is, the relation of the viewer to the work is affected by its reproducibility.[6] The category of a work of art’s authenticity, i.e., that of the original embedded in the context of its tradition, is destroyed by its technical reproduction. Benjamin sought a new binding character between the work and the viewer. He wanted to apprehend the uniqueness of the object anew and to make the confrontation become essential, so that the criticism of the work of art would serve less to evaluate it than to complete it.

This understanding of art is a true help in observing and evaluating the ‘judgment’ of the student’s work: by means of these clear acts of consciousness, the teacher contributes to encouraging the pupil and strengthening his will to learn (i.e., the completion of a work of art, according to Benjamin). The teacher truly teaches by perceiving the pupil’s willingness to learn and supporting it through evaluation. The work of the evaluator is now an objective/subjective reflection of a relationship and a challenge for the pupil.

A new possible form of evaluation and judgment

When one reflects on the foregoing and allows it to take effect on oneself, it is possible that something will now become clear: in school as well as in life, there is a 'what,' a 'how' and a 'who.' The 'what' consists of measurable facts, the 'how' contains a relationship between the learner and the teacher, and the 'who' indicates something that is unique, not immediately tangible but rather future-oriented, a kind of message from the future.

In order to make this dimension of evaluation and testing bear fruit in practice, I have attempted to introduce a new perspective of evaluating a pupil's work in the classroom. Based on a concrete example, I would like to show how the evaluation of the work in an architecture epoch in a twelfth grade high school main lesson looks and how the individual judgment of the work and subject knowledge of the pupils is considered. The theme of the main lesson is actually only of secondary importance; the method of this evaluation is certainly transferable to all other school subjects. The following report is based on several main lessons.

When eighteen-year-olds – who are in the process of presenting themselves through their full-year projects – encounter a subject, it is indispensable to reach agreement on certain points from the beginning. What is the purpose/goal of the main lesson? How do we reach it? Why is it important? How do we observe that the agreement between the teacher and the pupil is valid and binding? Because after all, in the twelfth grade the pupils have long been jointly responsible for the design and primary focus of a main lesson within the framework of their limited comprehension and competence.

Now, in order to be able to document authentic information concerning an individual's work at the end of the epoch, the manner of procedure is harmonized with the class. The pupils independently plan the written and documentary elaboration of the material; however, the deadline for handing in the project is fixed. Each one must give a fifteen-minute talk before the class, followed by a ten-minute discussion period, on two structures of modern architecture, with comments on slides of these works from the standpoint of a specialist (architectural statics, style, and so forth), using any desired auxiliaries such as slides or laser pens, and including a brief biographical sketch of the architect. Following this, the other pupils and the teacher can ask questions. After the discussion an evaluation takes place.

First the pupil evaluates his own performance (from the standpoint of subject, content, communication). Then the class reacts to the presentation and comments on its strengths and weaknesses. In the third step the teacher gives his/her evaluation. Self-evaluation and evaluation by others are aspects of reality: the pupil, the class, and the teacher. Again and again one hears impressive statements such as: "I succeeded in communicating something, but if I had looked at Structure X more closely, I could have answered such-and-such question more clearly," or: "I see that I have to speak more slowly,

if I want to present something more clearly," or again: "If I had to do it over again, I would do it differently."

A wealth of promising resolutions regarding self-knowledge come into view. What happens when the class comments on a pupil's work together with the teacher? Through the active interest and attention on the part of everyone, there arises a clear feeling for the work of the student involved. Most statements are considerate but unsparing. The class learns to speak and criticize in such a way that the statement becomes acceptable, constructive, and fruitful. In conclusion the teacher gives an evaluation based on his experience and his overall view of the student's work, and he attempts to characterize clearly the student's competence in the subject. The future, the present, and the past are drawn together in the evaluation.

What results from this? Three statements that are of equal value and worth. It is not the expert/teacher (from yesterday) who evaluates alone, rather the individual's work is consciously apprehended in its social context by everyone involved. For years it has been shown that this manner of testing contains more value, differentiation and truth content that the traditional, reductive standard method of evaluation. Testing and evaluation are implemented in the social realm; out of this form of evaluation the cultural climate can develop which was spoken of in the 1966 UNESCO report: *Learning Ability: Our Hidden Wealth*.[7] The individual, the world, and the student's peers meet each other in a real way, without barriers or standards, and for this reason, they come closer together. This creates reality.

Endnotes:

1. Pisa 2000. *Basiskompetenz yon Schulerinnen im internationalen Vergleich*, OECD Pisa: 2001.
2. Daniel Goeudevert: "Der Horizon, hat Fluegel, die Zukunf, der Bildung." *Econ*. 2001.
3. Edgar Morin: *Relier les connaissances, le defi du 21eme siecle*, Seuil: 1999.
4. Rudolf Steiner, Lecture dated June 19, 1919. GA 330, *Neugestaltung des sozialen Organismus*, Dornach, Switzerland.
5. Jürgen Wiehmann (HRG): *Zwolf Unterriehtsmethoden*. Beltz, 2002.
6. Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935–39)
7. Exhibition catalogue for the 44th Meeting of the International Conference of Education of the UNESCO in Geneva:1994, Freunde der Erziehungskunst, Weinmeisterstr. 16, 10178, Berlin, Germany.