Learning for Life – Learning from Life

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Schools are always faced with new challenges. It is part of the teacher's task to become aware of the spirit of the times and learn to understand it. Awareness can start with the most simple of events, possibly with the following daily occurrence: Young people enter the school and leave it again.

This is an interesting area of observation. We may experience their coming in and going out like a deep breath which complements every school day. It is a movement without which school could not happen, and it is a movement that continues throughout the school day, because breathing in and out is an underlying concept of teaching. We welcome the pupils in the morning and we say goodbye to them at the end of the day. Every lesson lives between these two—the beginning and the end—and between them unfolds a variety of learning processes. Here we already see a crucial feature of teaching: teaching is not only about the teaching of knowledge. "Correct" breathing implies another quality, a quality that echoes in our daily teaching routines. Even if we do not consciously shape this breathing process, it is nonetheless influenced by the activities we do with the pupils. If we carefully observe how the pupils enter and leave the school, we may be able to perceive whether breathing is nurtured at a particular school.

Learning for life / Learning from life

The class teacher plays a prominent role in the life of a Waldorf school. Today, however, the eight-year duration of the class teacher's time with a class is being questioned. People ask how a single person can possibly teach every subject competently, since they tend to think this is an impossible task. Specialist subject teachers would do the job much better, wouldn't they? If we were to focus only on a teacher's knowledge of a subject, we would have to agree, but there is more to teaching than just imparting knowledge of a subject.

What, then, is so special about a class teacher? It is his or her ability to be the role model of an ever-changing and developing human being. A strong inner image must be created to try to respond to children's development from first through eighth grades. I once observed how some ninth grade students were carefully watching their former class teacher; they wanted to see how she had changed in the five weeks between the end of the previous school year and the beginning of the new one and whether she would handle the transition successfully. Watching her appear on stage with her new first grade children made her former students not only smile but also feel a deep respect for her. It is the development of the human being that is particularly important and not only the teaching of facts and knowledge.

This is not to say that competence in a subject is not essential; subject knowledge is indeed crucial. Therefore, many schools have arranged support for class teachers in particular subject areas, whether in the form of another teacher taking on a specific subject for the class teacher or of the class teacher collaborating with a colleague. Through these considerations, we may begin to discern that *life itself* is a teacher. We need to work with this reality more consciously.

> The first social-educational area is one which is to serve our newly founded Waldorf school, the area that includes classes for adolescents, the tuition, and education by which people are to be

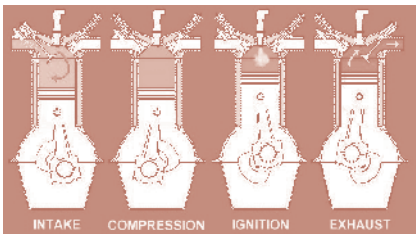
> prepared for what is required of them by a truly social thinking both now and for the foreseeable future. …The other area we can consider social and pedagogical is that, of which I would say, it should impart the "theory of life." We are in a poor way if we face life rigidly and as a stranger. We stand rightly in life only if every moment of every day and every week of every year is a source of learning for us, for our further development. We will have experienced our school best—no matter how far we have come in it—if we have learned through this school how to learn from life. … Life is a school for every healthy human being.[1]

Therefore we do not leave real life at the doorstep of the classroom. We invite it in, but it has to be in a form appropriate to the children. By doing this, we make it possible for the pupils to face life in an increasingly conscious way until, in the upper grades, they can begin to practice reflecting upon their own experiences.

So, how does this look in practice? One of the lessons in the lower school is "From Grain to Bread." The children are actively involved in the complete process throughout the cycle of the seasons, from the sowing of the grain to the baking of the bread. Thus the children experience fully all the related activities in a holistic way. Later, in the upper grades, students spend three weeks with people with learning difficulties, people who need help with managing routine tasks. The students start to ask themselves what it means to have learning difficulties. What kind of help is appropriate without causing offense? What is the connection between themselves and a person with learning difficulties? These challenging questions arise out of real encounters and are not abstract or theoretical. Out of this kind of interaction with real life emerges learning from life and learning for life. But who has prepared this lesson? For the time being, the answer remains in the dark, but something does indeed happen and we are able to look back on it. Looking back is a way of reflection that connects the experience to real life.

Indeed, school happens not only inside the classroom. It is of utmost importance that teaching, the core task of the school, connects theoretical knowledge with the world and with life. At Waldorf schools we study plants not only in books but also in their natural surroundings during regular nature walks and later in botany camps. The same can be said for mathematical forms such as the parabola. We calculate and draw it but we do not forget its appearance in an "earthly" context—the parabolic mirror, for instance, or the trajectory of a jet of water. Yet, even more important now is the question of relevance between a parabola or a plant and the student. As teachers we prepare our lessons and form a connection to the subject content; a meaningful content will have a connection to the world and also a connection to ourselves. How does this connection live within us?

As an example, let us take a four-stroke engine, a so-called Otto engine.



Allow me to take you through a sequence of activities which I used to do with my students when I introduced this engine. Please observe how your relationship to the engine changes as we go through the process together.

The sequence is as follows: 1. Intake (or suction) stroke. 2. Compression stroke. 3. Combustion (or power) stroke. 4. Exhaust stroke. I draw the rhythm and function on the board and the students can see the actual parts of the engine itself. Now I start up an open engine; then I bring the engine closer and the students' understanding grows. Implicit in all these activities, the questions will arise: What does this engine have to do with me as a human being? How can I bring about a dynamic

relationship between the knowledge and the students?

Here is an attempt to make a new connection: the four phases can be demonstrated acoustically.

Intake stroke (strong sound of breathing in): SHSHSHSHSHSHSH
Compression stroke (breathing out): AAAAAAAHHH
Combustion stroke (breathing in): Boom!!!
Exhaust stroke (breathing out): Phooo!
Or, in one breath: SH – AH – Boom – Phooo
Let's do this now to a strict rhythm: SH – AH … etc.

It quickly becomes clear that this is a rhythm that leaves us breathless. It does not correspond to our natural breathing rhythm. But we practice it and try to observe the effect on ourselves. The next step comes out of the fact that there is not only one cylinder in such an engine but usually four of them. So we divide the class into four groups and create a Four-Stroke-Engine Canon.

An inner picture, almost like an inner gesture of the engine, emerges through this activity. Through engaging with this gesture, we interact with the content of the lesson in such a way that its core can show itself. Furthermore, we have been uplifted by this experience. The students have been invigorated because they understand the content better, and we are invigorated because we have made the effort to engage with an inner gesture. This is the realm of the life forces that, on the one side, enable learning and, on the other, rejuvenate us. Real learning has an invigorating effect and gives us new strength. It is a celebration!

Nevertheless, let us not forget that a celebration needs to be properly prepared. It needs planning and devotion to make it a success. However, everyone who has ever prepared a party knows how many unexpected things can happen. Not only is knowledge needed in such a situation but also the ability to accept whatever comes—indeed, to be able to see the unexpected as a welcome challenge rather than as a setback.

Vaulting

Not long ago I watched a group of gymnasts doing the wildest kinds of jumps: direct vaults, handsprings, somersaults, and so forth. I was impressed with the sequence of vaults from start to finish. First, the athletes concentrated. They visualized their vault, they imagined every phase precisely until they felt ready to go. Then they started. But on the way they had to let go of their inner images. While running towards the vaulting table, they had to release their images and build up a complete presence culminating in the point of take-off and flying through the air. Finally, there was the moment of landing, preferably on their feet. Unfortunately, the athletes were unable stop at the landing point and thus missed a beautiful opportunity to remain at the landing point for an instant and assess their achievement, both in terms of its success and its shortcomings.

This sequence of events may also serve as a metaphor for the three phases of education: preparation, teaching, and reflection. We prepare our lessons. We know what we want to do, we have internalized the lesson's content. Then we enter the classroom. Now we have to let go and allow a presence of mind to form our encounters with the students. How are they today? What lives in them today? If we see teaching as an art, we also have to understand that learning happens in the void between teacher and pupil. This void is an indefinite and mysterious space that comes into being only in the encounter between student and teacher; therefore we need to reflect upon it afterwards and ask ourselves what happened.

What, then, about the first phase of preparation: How does it relate to teaching? Do we have to make an inner leap at some point? Rudolf Steiner starts his account of this phase with an important indication:

> We can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task.[2]

Please imagine that I have a piece of yellow chalk in one hand and a blue piece in the other. What can I create out of the tension between yellow and blue? One possibility is to mix the colors and make a new color: green. Green is neither blue nor yellow. If I look at this action I would describe it as a matter of intellect or feeling. It corresponds to something very commonplace today. I often see essays that students have pieced together from various fragments of texts found on the Internet. This manner of working is not confined to pupils, of course; teachers also know it well. We take a section from this course book and a fragment from another book, combine them, and in this way arrive at a new lesson.

A real challenge, however, is to address the following question: In one hand I have a piece of chalk in the primary color yellow, in the other hand a piece in the primary color blue, but how do I get from these two primary colors to the third primary color, red?

An answer can be found only if we dare to make an inner jump.

In his writings and lectures, Steiner challenges us again and again to make these kinds of jumps. We cannot do justice to his thinking if we do not leap.

Enabling students to face the future, or Education is self-education

Let us take a next step and look at the jump from another angle.

> Basically, there is no education other than self-education, whatever the level may be. …Every education is self-education, and as teachers we can only provide the environment for the child's own self-education. We have to provide the most favorable conditions in which, through our agency, the child can educate itself in accordance with its own destiny.[3]

We are teachers not only on the basis of our own education or on the basis of being employed by a school; we are teachers chiefly on the grounds that we are in a constant process of development, in a process of self-education. In our demanding profession it is of utmost importance to focus on the process of self-education.

We know from classroom practice that we need to support and develop the aspect of light in our students. In this practice lies the strength to command our shadow side. Our most dignified task as teachers is to strengthen our own light and let it shine, to encourage the children and trust them. When we trust individual students to find within themselves the power to mature, we demonstrate that in every one of us there lives the seeds of the future.

Let me give you an example: I knew a ninth grade student who was an excellent gymnast. In fact, he was better than his gym teacher. Understandably, some tension arose between them. When the teacher wanted to introduce somersaults to the class, for instance, the student, out of a sense of defiance, demanded that the teacher demonstrate first. This was the last straw. The teacher brought the case to the College of Teachers. At first, the teachers considered punishments, but when they shifted their focus to asking about what the student should actually learn, a new idea emerged: the student was asked to become the gym teacher's assistant for two weeks. The parents gave permission for their son to be freed from the regular timetable. Within a couple of days the student and the gym teacher became a good team. The student realized that his clever showing off had been frustrating for his peers and had sabotaged a positive learning environment. He came to understand just how much imagination it takes to respond repeatedly to the same situation. The successful working towards the future, as it happened in

this case, helped to foster new confidence in the student. It was the vision of the future that was helpful rather than looking into the past. In a radical way we can say that the question "Who am I?" needs to be answered more with the help of a future vision, with a vision towards what wants to come into being. Healthy confidence is no longer fostered by the past.

This becomes clear when we look at people's careers today. In the past, individuals chose their professions according to their family's traditions. This is no longer the case. Young people today have to find their own way, out of their own strength. The crucial task for developing adolescents is to accept themselves and to become able to face their future. As teachers we ought to provide a helpful environment for these processes.

Self-governance

Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical initiatives were not restricted to the classroom; they consisted of much more. For adolescents to emancipate themselves out of their own freedom requires an environment that puts this ideal into practice. We are called to do our work in this spirit. Out of this emerges one of the most pressing questions of our time: How do free individuals work together?

Steiner created an exceptional moment at the beginning of his teaching course in 1919 when he talked about a new dimension of cooperation. He initiated a progressive form of communication, a new kind of listening and speaking. Every single one of us is called to become a creative, productive individual in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance. How is this to be understood? One remarkable example lives in a school I visited recently in which each teacher was encouraged to pursue his or her own research project and was given the necessary support to do so. Thus, a number of studies emerged within a short time and started to enliven the teaching practice at this particular school. A college of researchers grew. The teachers' own productivity was encouraged by the receptiveness of the others. In other words, initiative was encouraged. The spiritual world was taken into account in this kind of research. This spirit of initiative creates room for potential and this, in turn, can have an inspiring effect on the management of the school. Day-to-day cooperation becomes a vessel for impulses from the spiritual world, and it is this collaboration which shapes the management structures. In other words, a circle is not merely a series of individual points.

For a circle to be a circle, the space between the points must be filled. What one human being can give to another, what each wants to give each other, this is what fills the void and thus creates a completed circle.

Today, we have drawn an arc across teaching—let us hope a colorful one. Now we have to step into it. From the theme of learning for life and learning from life, past the gestures of an engine, and finally to the possibilities of cooperation, everywhere we have found the same theme: it needs to be put into practice.

A rich field of opportunities for practice opens up. It is not only more work and pressure. It is an activity that enlivens us and lightens the load; it refreshes us and leads us into the core of our work.

Endnotes

1. Rudolf Steiner, GA 297, Lecture 4 (not available in English).
2. Rudolf Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience*, GA 293 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996), p. 33.
3. Rudolf Steiner, *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education,* GA 306 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1988), p. 145.

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