# The Concept of Learning in Waldorf Education

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## Introductory case study: A ninth grade farm trip

Thirty-five students are spending two weeks at an organic farm in northern Germany. This is a ninth grade, with almost equal numbers of boys and girls. The farm is responsible for providing these young people with accommodation, meals, and educational instruction. Every day there are tasks to be done in the following areas: work with animals (pigs and cows), the cheese dairy, vegetable garden and orchard, field work, and forestry. In groups of five the students work in each of these areas in turn. In addition there are daily mini-lessons on various aspects of farming and forestry.

For the first three to five days the students struggle to embrace the challenges. Removed from their familiar surroundings, tied to a demanding, though not overly strenuous, work process, they feel it is all too much. Getting up early (at 6:30am), which is actually not much different from a normal school day, proves very laborious. Since many parents have supplied their children with large amounts of sweets and snacks, the healthy and nourishing meals provided by the farm at first go largely uneaten. Tasks that are simple but require some staying power—like digging a vegetable bed—lead many students, after a very short time, to imagine they are exhausted. The working atmosphere at this early stage is thus rather strained.

Then something happens on the fourth day: while everyone is eating lunch, one of the girls comes running excitedly into the dining hall with the news that one of the farm horses has broken out of its paddock. With one accord the pupils are on their feet and rush off to catch the horse. They find it grazing in a meadow not too far from the paddock. As the students, all bunched together, approach it, it takes to its heels, stops about twenty to thirty yards further on, and resumes grazing. The pursuers never succeed in getting any closer than the horse's preferred distance of about twenty yards. Every time they try to close in, the horse keeps its distance. They spend the next three quarters of an hour in heated discussions over how to solve the problem. By then the horse has reached a copse, in which there is a little glade rounded off at one end.

The group agrees upon a plan of action: they surround the horse on both sides, without infringing upon its space, and then close in from behind. While doing this they manage to refrain from speaking or making any sudden movements, and in this way, within half an hour, they have succeeded in returning the horse to its paddock.

The adult observers soon realize that this episode has broken the spell of the first few days: the work has become less arduous, the students draw lots to see who will get up at 5:00 o'clock in the morning instead of 6:30 to be in the byre early enough to help with milking and, last but not least, the ample helpings of food now go into hungry young bellies instead of back to the kitchen uneaten. When the fourteen days are up and it is time to leave, there are tearful farewells with the family who runs the farm and with animals that have become favorites. It also comes about that a small group of students voluntarily returns to help on the farm during the following summer holidays.

## The concept of learning

Since the dawn of Western culture, a prime concern of all thinkers—from philosophers to

psychologists, education theorists and, most recently, neuroscientists—has been the nature of the process of learning and its significance in human life. The variety of ideas about the nature of learning reflects the range of ideas of human nature and/or worldviews from which they arise, and this in turn bears witness to the diverse aspects of learning upon which the scientific gaze is focused. Although there are often sharply opposing arguments in play, it is less a question of right and wrong and more of deciding which concept of learning and, in consequence, which worldview one will embrace.

Viewing the human being as equipped with a potential for freedom and capable of acting out of self-motivation and insight (a view championed by anthroposophy) entails an attempt to organize learning in an open way and make it more responsive to personal requirements. This gives us a point of departure for the consideration of Waldorf education, which now follows.

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## Representation and will

In lecture after lecture, given to the college of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919 and in subsequent years, Rudolf Steiner emphatically pointed out that Waldorf education, contrary to the school systems of his time, is not about "head-learning" but about "limb-learning" (1980). The importance of these expressions is clear: the aim is not the one-sided inculcation of facts and ideas, but the education of the will. Steiner thus strongly rejected what he saw as the "cerebralized" education of his day.

In this he was saying something essentially similar to other contemporary educational reformers. School, according to Steiner, does not exist solely to instruct the "head." Its purpose is not to cram as large a volume of facts (in the form of mental representations) as possible into the pupils' heads. He criticized the one-sided emphasis upon accumulating such representations and storing them in the memory for the purposes of examinations.

The problem lies not in the representations as such—they, of course, have their place in Waldorf education and need to be learned and retained. It lies rather in the fact that representations give no hint to consciousness of their cognitive origins, namely, the mind's own activity in productively combining percept and concept. Epistemologically speaking, they suppress our participation in the construction of reality, thus casting our conscious experience in the mould of subject-object dualism. Consciousness in representation-mode construes the world as something opposite to its own being—an entity set apart in principle. If school lessons are conducted in such a way that emphasis is placed solely upon the reception and reproduction from memory of contents that have the character of representations, this will have the effect of reinforcing in experience the separation of mind and world. Only insofar as teaching style is not restricted to conveying contents of this kind alone, but takes account of the individual mind's active contribution to the formation of representations and makes practical, didactic use of it, will the mind's participation in the construction of reality enter into experience.

This leads to an essentially monistic form of awareness, which experiences itself as not separated from the phenomena, but involved, both epistemologically and functionally, in the genesis of reality and which provides the basis for the development of an individual's abilities.

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context "will" refers to the active contribution made by the human organism to the coming into being of representations. It is the dispositional and conditional abilities that are formed in this active constituting of reality. In this sense, then, the aim of learning in Waldorf education is the formation of dispositions (increase in abilities through encountering the world) and conditions (the generation of concepts by human thinking).[2]

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### The ninth grade trip: what was learned?

Having thus described this case study of a learning process, the question is: what did the students learn? They became actively engaged in the farm as a whole. As an organism the farm set certain tasks that needed to be done, and the students made them their own. In doing so, they learned something about the origin of foodstuffs, about the processes they have to be put through, about working with animals and plants, and about human nutrition in general. In other words they learned something about a particular aspect of the world and how it works. Moreover, they discovered their ability to mobilize their own capacity for effort and developed a strong motivation for work. Through having been placed in a position of caring for the natural world, and especially for the animals, they went some way towards developing an ethic of respect for nature, reflected in a newly-won ability for appropriate action. Not least, the class community greatly benefited from an improved level of mutual respect and considerateness.

All in all, then, the learning that took place here encompassed skills in a wide range of areas: emotional (sympathetic engagement with the farm), motivational and volitional (readiness to work, perseverance), cognitive (agricultural knowledge), ethical-moral (respect for nature), and social (class community).

A key factor in all this was the episode of the runaway horse. It was a learning opportunity built into the structure of the visit as a whole, but even so it cannot be said to have been the sole reason for the success of the learning process. What it did was to create a major turning point. It was a real-life situation. The learning did not take place in a classroom under "artificial" conditions set up by a teacher, but in the context of an actual working farm. All the work processes the students went through were at the same time those of the farm itself. This is, of course, an exception to the normal school day, but it illustrates a key element of what learning, in Waldorf terms, is really about, namely, an experience of the world that is directly relevant to practical life. This aspect of learning will now be considered in relation to meaning and truth.

Learning, in Waldorf terms, is really about an experience of the world that is directly relevant to practical life.

### Truth

Every learning process is accompanied by a certain question, which may or may not be verbalized: "why do I have to learn this?" No student will be satisfied with the answer: "because you'll need it later in life." Learning must be meaningful in itself. For instance, the acquisition in early childhood of practical and motor skills (grasping, walking, speech, and so forth) represents an immediate experience of success in learning. The newly-learned abilities are geared to the purposes of satisfying various needs. This is meaningful.

As the child then passes through school, the immediate experience of meaning will tend to recede into the background as the level of abstraction in lesson content increases. This calls for a teaching methodology centered

upon the creation of meaning. By drawing upon content in tune with developmental phases, real life, and human nature, such teaching integrates meaning—in the form of relevance—into the educational landscape as a whole. The point is to establish a relevant connection to the world, against which the correctness of the things one has learned and acquired can be gauged. The world is the yardstick upon which educational success is to be measured.

Käte Meyer-Drawe grants the establishing of a concrete connection to the world a very important place in the process of learning, designating it as the promotion of "phenomenal rights." (2008a) And here Alfred Schirlbauer quite rightly calls for truth- and/or accuracy-based learning: "with no relation to 'truth' and 'accuracy,' it would make little or no sense to speak of insight, understanding or knowledge." (2008, p. 205) Here, of course, truth is not intended in any ultimate philosophical sense. Rather, it is being used in its more pragmatic meaning of everyday logic, which appears as the working knowledge that proves itself in every successfully performed action and as the general understanding that lives in the particularity of whatever content learning is focused on. In connection with the previously mentioned faculties of disposition and condition, truth implies the object-relational attachment of acquired concepts to percepts (individualization, which leads to dispositions), and to other concepts (generalization, which leads to conditions).

Schirlbauer writes, in reference to Theodor Ballauff (Ballauff 1970), that "thinking cannot be willed, rather it must assimilate us; we are taken hold of by a train of thought when 'we think'." (2008, p. 207) In effect, he is pointing out that our experience of how insight arises provides evidence of the autonomy of thinking. The learning subject experiences the objective attachment of certain faculties to the inherent requirements of an object, in this case of a thought. In this position, however, the subject is not overpowered or placed under compulsion; rather insights, whether implicit or explicit, act as a catalyst for the development of the subject's abilities. An insight does not entail any kind of compulsion, since it is also the product of the activity of a subject. (cf. Witzenmann 1992) It would be absurd to maintain that we are forced to open the door before leaving a room because we know it is a good idea. The subject determines his or her own actions on the basis of acquired insights, which exist in the form of individually validated truths.

> To learn is to participate in the workings of the world as mirrored by acquired dispositional and conditional abilities.

Upon such a background the currently oft-quoted formula of learning to learn is simply redundant. Learning, after all, is not an end in itself; it is always directed towards something. That is the main test of its occurrence. Schirlbauer makes a strong distinction between such an object- or content-oriented concept of learning and a mere training in various methods: "learning and teaching theory must be about the contents being learned and taught, because without them there can be no learning, because … the 'contents' are the thoughts we learn to think in the process of learning." (2008, p. 205) For their part, the thoughts stand in relation to a something, "which provides the sole basis for any talk of the correctness, appropriateness, or, ultimately, the truth of a judgement." (Ibid.) Describing things thus in terms of concrete object-relations (where "object" can be understood as "world") expands the concept of learning as "content-oriented." It is not geared towards the past, as in the model that sees learning as the acquiring of a canon of knowledge set down in a curriculum. Rather, very much in the style of the previously described case-study, it points to a more

holistic form of learning, which encompasses implicit areas of "knowledge."

In this sense, to learn is to participate in the workings of the world as mirrored by acquired dispositional and conditional abilities. Waldorf education puts this understanding of learning into practice, in that it has a decided preference for experiential and practical learning processes. Projects involving arts, crafts, and industrial skills are systematically integrated into the school day. Even the more abstract, cognitive subjects, such as mathematics, are taught in as imaginative and practical a way as possible.

## Remembering

There is a further aspect to be considered: the process of learning cannot succeed unless that which has been learned persists in time and does not simply dissipate. It must be preserved. Here Rudolf Steiner speaks of "treasures of the past." (1922, p. 52) Whatever else it might be, learning is always a process of perpetuation. That which has been acquired by learning becomes a lasting component of the human personality. For this to happen, memory must be activated. Rudolf Steiner describes the faculty of memory as a fundamental attribute of the human soul. Within this context the word *soul* is functionally defined as the preserver of the past.

How, then, according to Steiner, does memory work? On this question there is an illuminating passage in his book *Theosophy*. Having begun by pointing out the transitory nature of sensations, he then goes more closely into the process of memory:

> The body would allow all impressions to sink back again into nothing were it not that whilst the present image is being formed through the act of perception, something is also taking place in the relationship between the outer world and the soul, as a result of which the man is able, subsequently, to form, through his own inner processes, a fresh image of that which he received in the first place as an image from outside himself. (1922)

This is a rather complex formulation, especially in that he says something also takes place between the outer world and the soul through which representations are formed in the present. What does this mean? Steiner points to the process by which representations are formed. As previously described, he regards them as produced by the union of sensory perceptions and concepts generated by thinking. He decisively rejects naïve realism—the notion that external phenomena are perceived and then laid down in consciousness as representations.

The human being is not simply a receptive vessel for the world but is highly active and productive in relation to it. It is not that images of a ready-made reality are simply taken in; rather, human consciousness is actively involved in the construction of reality. However, as previously mentioned, in our experience of representations, we are not conscious of the participatory process that went into their formation. For waking consciousness the (already formed) representation is the starting point. Since this is an end-product of the process whereby reality is constructed, and is thus already distinct from it, Witzenmann emphatically states: "Our normal consciousness is thus a representational consciousness, containing little in the way of actual reality." (1985, p. 61)

Witzenmann distinguishes between a fundamental structure[3] of human cognition actively involved in the construction of reality and a secondary structure, which expresses this constructive process in the form of representational memory images. In Steiner's terms this fundamental structure is the unifying of percept and concept. This is the process that takes place between the outer world and the soul, and makes it possible for the human being to "form, through his own inner processes, a

fresh image of that which he received in the first place as an image from outside himself." (Steiner 1922) These processes, which are experienced inwardly, Steiner designates as memory. He defines his position as follows:

> Anyone who has acquired practice in observing the life of the soul will be able to realize how erroneous it is to say that a man has a perception today, and tomorrow, through memory, the same perception appears again, having meanwhile remained somewhere or other within him. No; the perception which I now have is a phenomenon which passes away with the "now." When recollection takes place, a process occurs in me which is a result of something that happened, in addition to the calling forth of the actual present image, in the relation between the external world and me. The image called forth through remembrance is a new one, and not the old one preserved. Recollection consists in the fact that one can make a fresh mental image to oneself, and not that a former image can revive. What appears again in recollection is something different from the original image itself. (1922, p. 50)

According to this view, it is not the previously formed representation that appears again, but a newly formed one. This occurs in relation to "something that happened, in addition to the calling forth of the actual present image, in the relation between the external world and me." (Ibid.) But this "something" is none other than the original participatory joining of percept and concept just now termed fundamental structure. This amounts to the formulation, on Steiner's part, of a new concept of recollection: recollection is not only concerned with established representations, but, in recalling something to memory, the participatory element in the previous formation of the concept enters into consciousness. This creates what could be called the magic of recollection—the fact that to recollect is to overcome passive, dualistic spectator consciousness, for in doing so we become aware of the participatory activity that went into the previous making of the recollected representation, and at the same time of the self as an entity capable of developing dispositional abilities in relation to reality. In various contexts Rudolf Steiner has referred to this as recollection of spirit: in recollecting, the human being implicitly recollects the fact that he is a spiritual being, productively involved—in that to be so is part of his own self-realization—in the formation of reality. At the same time this gives us the essence of Steiner's concept of spirit: spirit is not simply a world of beings existing in the beyond, but the inner being of man actively expressed within reality.

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An inkling of this magic of recollection can be felt, for instance, from visiting, after long absence, some childhood haunt and being moved by the smallest impressions—a specific scent or a particular quality of light. It becomes apparent that one is not only registering the impression of the moment, but at the same time recollecting one's past involvement in its making, in other words, one's own being.

## Forgetting

Cognition and memory, as portrayed by Rudolf Steiner, are highly active processes. This has direct consequences for the learning process. In Waldorf education learning is understood as the active exploration of reality. It cannot be efficacious unless the human subject is as involved in the process as possible.

Learning, therefore, is no mere pouring of material into a passive, receptive vessel, but an active, personal, and emotional process. In learning, the human personality attains its own particular configuration, since in the process it moulds itself according to its own sense of reality. From the point of view of Waldorf methodology, therefore, it is inadvisable to make pre-determined facts, images, and ideas the object of learning. While these may be useful in providing direction and structure, the crucial thing for the process of learning is to implement awareness of the learner's participation in the construction of reality. This is done through ensuring that what happens in the classroom involves direct experience and practical action. Steiner emphasized, moreover, that it is essential for the Waldorf teacher to use "pictures" and "flexible concepts" in his or her teaching. This amounts to another way of pointing out the inadvisability of using fixed content.

There is, however, something else to be considered—the aspect of forgetting. In his approach to learning, one of Rudolf Steiner's most noteworthy achievements is his elucidation of the significance of forgetting in the learning process. Of course, strictly speaking, what is meant here is deliberate forgetting; for incidental forgetting is directly associated with forgetting one's participation in the construction of reality. Deliberate forgetting, on the other hand, functions such that the normal tendency for the conscious mind to be dominated by acquired representations is more or less systematically superseded. This is practiced in Waldorf education by keeping representations more "open," by pictorial teaching and the use of flexible concepts. Lessons are structured in such a way that typically they will end with a directly relevant experiential moment of some kind (often in the form of a story), or better still with an open question. In conventional Waldorf parlance, this is referred to as "taking something into the night." On subsequent days the theme will be taken up and gone into in more depth. Organizing lessons in so-called "main lesson blocks," in which a particular subject will be taught for the first two hours every morning for three or four weeks, is a form highly suited to deepening the material from day to day and integrating sleep into the process.

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This approach to learning, developed by Rudolf Steiner more than ninety years ago, is now being empirically investigated by brain scientists. Chiefly American research has shown that lesson contents are anchored better in the memory just before the sleep phase. (Karni et al. 1994, Wilson and McNaughton 1994, Plihal 1997) In this a distinction is made between the so-called declarative memory, mostly responsible for storing items of knowledge, and the non-declarative or procedural memory, responsible for skills and actions. The findings of Wilson and McNaughton and Karni indicate that so-called REM sleep is associated with non-declarative knowledge processing, and deep sleep with declarative.

In addition to the importance of the night for learning, which is thereby consolidated and secured, the principle of the main-lesson form also entails that a given subject, after being intensely focused upon for three or four weeks, is then left to rest for a while. This does not mean that the contents of the lesson are forgotten, but it does imply that the mind's grip upon them is loosened. When the same subject then appears on the timetable three to six months later, the representations will have lost their formerly sharp contours, and the students are now required, in the sense of the

Steiner passage quoted earlier, to make new ones. In so doing they have the opportunity to re-experience their connection to the subject as a part of their own biography.

## Transformation

A further, previously mentioned, dimension of learning implicit in all this is transformation. The case of the agricultural field trip described earlier demonstrated that the first days on the farm had very much the character of a crisis. Learning always involves effort; it must of necessity lead to a crisis. Even good teachers cannot spare their students the effort of learning. Good teaching does not mean that everything comes easily to the students and no crises arise. It means, rather, good crisis management, which involves teaching them how to cope with the struggles and crises of learning. Errors and mistakes thus become important and necessary wake-up calls, which sharpen alertness to what is "correct." (cf. Benner 2005) If a learner cannot become aware of what he is doing wrong, then he can never develop a sense for what is correct. A pedagogical approach that seeks to deal with this by penalizing errors (for instance, by giving bad grades) will be counter-productive. The crises intrinsic to learning lead to the learner's changing his accustomed view of the content. The fixed structure of representations is breached. A transformation takes place. The subject transforms him- or herself in relation to the conditions of the object.

Good teaching means good crisis management, which involves teaching students how to cope with the struggles and crises of learning.

That is one aspect of the process. The other is that transformation also happens in the opposite direction—from object to subject. In every successful learning process, the objects transform themselves in the dispositional and conditional capacities of the subject. The French painter Paul Cézanne used the phrase *sur le motif* to describe this reciprocal transformation of subject and object and visualized it as the image of clasped hands. If this occurs, learning becomes a highly satisfying experience because the human personality has become identified with its own abilities in a certain area of knowledge.

## Mother Holle

The well-known Grimms' fairy tale, "Mother Holle," contains many images directly relating to the learning process as described here and will now be interpreted in this connection (on this, see Witzenmann 1993). The story is about a woman who has two daughters, one "ugly and lazy" who never lifts a finger—she does not engage with reality in any way—and one "beautiful and hard-working" who goes to the well every day and sits there spinning. She does engage with reality, in that by dispositional means she spins her concepts into her percepts, and her thinking by conditional means into the cognitive context. She does this with such energy that she makes her hands bleed. In other words, she pours her own self into the process of reality, and this takes effort. Mere spectator consciousness does not get its hands bloody. Then this girl loses her spindle in the well. This is something of a crisis. It is crucial for the learning process, for it goes beyond the subject's limits (the known, the cognitively secure). Active thinking loses itself in the phenomena, and a will element, which does not have the same degree of wakefulness as representational consciousness, comes to the fore. The latter is being transcended. The human being loses himself in the phenomena. In the case-study this was the moment when the students jumped up from the lunch table to go and catch the horse. In the story, jumping into the well brings the girl to a new world: the subject is not forming representations of phenomena, but rather the phenomena begin

to express themselves in the subject. In the language of fairy tale imagery, the loaves say that they want to be taken out of the oven, and the apple tree that it wants to be shaken. The girl does all this and willingly becomes the servant of Mother Holle, who with her long teeth represents the wisdom and order of the world,[4] with which the girl, on account of her own active will, is able to engage. When she leaves the world of Mother Holle, she returns showered with gold. These are the "treasures of the past"—everything she has learned through actively engaging in reality. She has been equipped with the gold of her acquired abilities.

The other girl, who is lazy and ugly, would also like to have some gold. But she cannot let go of her fixed ideas. She pricks her finger on a thorny hedge to make it bleed. This can be taken as an image of a more mechanical kind of learning. Instead of drawing blood on the spindle of one's own thinking and feeling the pain of it, one does so on a thorny hedge of unwieldy, ready-made contents. The girl then jumps into the well, but cannot let go her fixed ideas and has no way of engaging actively with reality. She leaves Mother Holle's kingdom covered in pitch. This brings into relief the problem of a form of education that piles on information, but does little for the development of genuine abilities.

## Summary

The main points of this article are as follows:

• Transformation: Learning involves a crisis-laden relinquishing of fixed ideas and an active engagement with reality. This amounts to a mutual integration of self and world. Piaget called this *équilibration* (1976).

• Forgetting: To learn, one needs to forget; this means that the strong attachment to certain representations must be loosened. Sleep is a component of the learning process.

• Abilities: The rich reward of learning is the benefit to the self in the growth of one's own abilities. Dispositional and conditional abilities are developed.

• Comprehensiveness: Learning occurs through interaction with reality; this interaction should be as comprehensive (holistic), active, and—above all—experiential as possible. It is not just an accumulation of factual knowledge.

• Truth: In learning, the human being engages with the world and its order, the laws of which then express themselves in the abilities thus acquired.

• Meaning: This ability-based engagement with the world is what creates the experience of meaning through learning and gives it its intrinsic relevance.

## Endnotes

1. This article was first published in the online journal *RoSE* (*Journal for Research on Steiner Education*; www.rosejourn.com). It has been edited for publication in the *Research Bulletin* by Elan Leibner with the approval of the author.
2. Editor's note: The terms "disposition" and "condition" are used by the author in the sense first coined by Herbert Witzenmann (1905–1985), especially in his book *Der Urgedanke*. The original article includes a detailed elaboration of Witzenmann's presentation.
3. Translator's note: The word in German is *Grundstruktur*, and it is evident from the context that this fundamental structure is to be construed as a mental activity. Although in English the word "structure" is normally understood as the result rather than the cause of activity, I have left the phrase as it is. It is perhaps worth pointing out that there are English terms for this fundamental structure. Susanne Langer calls it "formulation," Henri Bortoft calls it "cognitive perception," and Owen Barfield calls it "figuration."
4. In his interpretation of this tale, Eugen Drewermann calls her "Mother Earth" (2002).

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