Reading, Writing, and Reading Comprehension

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In the last *Research Bulletin* (Autumn 2005), we saw how Waldorf education emphasizes nurturing and disciplining a student's emerging ego so as to allow it to become neither too firmly nor too loosely attached to the physical, ether, or astral bodies. Waldorf teachers must approach and teach students artistically.

Let us now consider the attitude of the teacher. Education is as effective as the teacher who enlivens and presents it. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, there is no such thing as history, there are only biographies. Similarly, we could say that there is no such thing as education, there are only educators.

A significant part of a teacher's attitude regards the future. The future should be a principal concern and source of imagination for every class we teach. Every time we stand before students, we should have their futures, the futures of all others, and the future of the earth in our consciousness.

It is possible to teach in such a way that there is, actually, no future at all, only a series of consequences derived from and determined by the past. Textbooks often model this approach with great confidence. Every time we teach from the present to the future in some incremental manner, we mimic such books. Cause, then effect. In history classes, for example, we are often content to show that event A leads to event B and that, in turn, event B leads to event C, and so forth. We make lists, maybe even organize them into charts. We may include the biographical agents of change as important, even significant. Yet, if our view of history is causal, a sense for the potential novelty of the future is demeaned.

In English classes, we show how sentences are constructed of words with names such as adjectives and verbs, and so forth. Even more destructively, we demonstrate how in poetry and novels and plays and biographies the beginning leads inexorably to the end. We faithfully and professionally demonstrate step by step how and where meaning may be found. Before long, every leading question has an answer, unexpressed, but sniffed out by any student alert enough to hear the query. We have trained many such brilliant students. Such an atomized view is a corollary to cause-and-effect teaching in history.

In math lessons, we take skill acquisition seriously, as we must, so we are tempted to teach students to calculate independently of the reasons for and the beauty of the relationship of the calculation and its goal. Conceptual understanding takes a back seat to expedience.

Time and again, when dealing with issues of pedagogy in the classroom, we are reminded of Rudolf Steiner's observations about the materialism of this age, specifically those comments which point out that we can not avoid it. Materialism regards more than our relationship to our physical surroundings; it regards our mental environment as well. We are trained to think in such a way that one thing leads to another, that we hunt out the meanings of life's failures and successes by finding their causes. These causes always lie in the past.

The future, then, is a reworked, refined, refashioned past that does not lose its power and authority for all that. After all, we need it, indeed, rely on it. As we reach the future by walking forward, looking backward, we can be excused a faint, common feeling of insecurity.

As teachers we need to make sense of this silliness and we need to find a way to work with it. We may not ignore these approaches to education, for we are of our own time. We fool ourselves if we believe that, as Waldorf school teachers or anthroposophists, we are immunized against the present. We do not, however, exist merely to mimic. We, rather, should give students the tools to redeem our insufficient views. We can only do this through our own struggles. Our task and our joy are to offer students suitable environments in which to conceive their thoughts, enlarge their feelings, engage their wills.

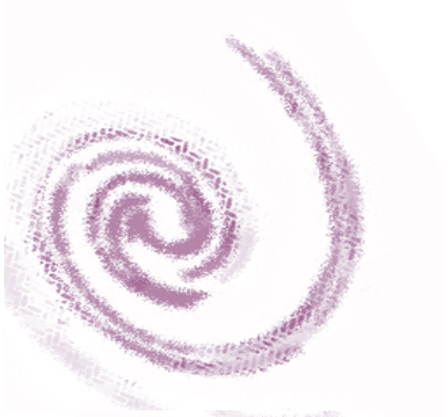
Steiner points out that purpose is an attribute of the actions of human beings and is not to be

mis-discovered in cause-and-effect relationships.[1] These are subject to the laws of the material world. The implications for our topic are clear: causality as a mode of instruction cannot succeed in creating purposeful individuals who can create a destiny and a society out of themselves. A causal way of thinking is inherently inadequate for human consumption. At best, it can explain the laws of nature. In effect, the pedagogy of our times reduces human beings to less than they are, reduces them to physical particles, even as it purports to do the opposite.

Steiner calls purposefulness "a special kind of sequence of phenomena. True purposefulness really exists only if, in contrast to the relationship of cause and effect where the earlier event determines the later, the reverse is the case and the later event influences the earlier one."[2] He then shows how to bring this concept directly into our thinking:

> To begin with, this happens only in the case of human actions. One performs an action of which one has previously made a mental picture, and one allows this mental picture to determine one's actions. Thus the later (the deed) influences the earlier (the doer) with the help of the mental picture. For there to be a purposeful connection, this detour through the mental picture is absolutely necessary.[3]

Taking these steps, teachers can move ahead on their own journeys to each present moment wherein our futures, the futures of our students, and the future of our civilization unite.

Endnotes

1. Steiner, R. *The Philosophy of Freedom: The Basis for a Modern World Conception*, M. Wilson, trans., London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2000, Chapter 11.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.