

Living Language in Waldorf Education

Helen Lubin

We need a new relationship to language if we want to progress in human evolution.

— Rudolf Steiner

Waldorf education takes place largely through the spoken word. Is this just a low-tech approach to education or is living language called upon to carry and contribute to the process of education? The forms in which this educator—living language—enacts its role vary in the course of a school day. The nature and practice of language also need to change throughout the school years in order to support and further a developing human being in a differentiated, age-appropriate way. Involving students with living language in purposeful, specific ways also furthers and supports them in facing the challenges and overcoming the hurdles of their developmental paths.

Particularly in connection with the founding of the first Waldorf school, and throughout the early years of this educational movement for cultural renewal, Rudolf Steiner repeatedly focused on the need to foster and develop the artistic elements of speech. Michaela Glöckler points out that Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical works contain more references to speech than to any other subject.¹

Through the artistic renewal of speech—usually referred to as speech formation, creative speech, or the art of the spoken word—we gain the possibility, out of inner activity, to enable speech to be filled with life. We discover the qualities of speech beyond its informational character alone. The more abstract speech becomes, the more human souls become separated from each other. The healing forces of process-filled speaking, speaking that carries warmth and light, allow us to be more fully present in meeting the world, each other, and ourselves.

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Speech in Waldorf Schools

The living word infuses the entire school day in a Waldorf school. Subjects which are not primarily concerned with language, such as woodworking classes, still have an important and differentiated speech component, involving such categories as greeting and dismissal, presentation, and descriptions of something either physically present or imagined.

“Main lesson” embraces different kinds of attention to speech: greeting, morning verse, activities of the rhythmic part of a main lesson—which includes daily speech practice per se—presentation of subject content, the way speech informs writing and reading, and a teacher's overall human presence through the spoken word. The connection between cultivation of

the spoken word and classroom management is striking.

In daily speech practice, the elements and processes of the art are engaged to support the developing individual. In the art of speech, some of these components are styles of poetry and prose, various meters, the qualities of consonant groups in connection with the elements of earth, air, fire, and water; the contrasting activities of recitation and declamation; and aspects that particularly engage willing, feeling, and thinking capacities of the soul.

Archetypal pedagogical gestures and forces that form the backdrop to Waldorf education also inform speech work. These include musical and sculptural qualities, formative and individualizing forces, changing relationships between the world and the individual, and the threefold and fourfold nature of the human being. These gestures and

1. 1994 West Coast Teachers' Conference.

forces work via our breath, affecting physiology and consciousness.

Just as different aspects of speech development proceed from differentiated aspects of movement development, so too is speech development foundational to creative, flexible, and capable thinking—a prerequisite for a sense of reality in our involvement with the changing world in which we live.

The Evolving Conversation between World and Individual

As we move through the early stages of our lives, we need our experience of the sense world to become increasingly transparent for meaning. This holds true for speech as a sense impression.

Besides the many existing sociological, psychological, and neurological approaches and explorations concerned with speech, an additional inroad of particular interest in connection with the growing human being is a phenomenological one. What do we perceive when a person speaks? We can distinguish these three aspects: first, vocal qualities such as volume, pitch, timbre, inflection, and intonation. Second, we hear speech sounds, which render the utterance intelligible. Speakers of a given language all use these same sounds or phonemes. They constitute an objective and shared aspect of speech. A speaker of the English language says “chair” when speaking of a chair, and this is not modified in accordance with the speaker’s mood, self-image, temperament, or degree of attention. In the case of the voice, however, the opposite is true; everyone has his or her own voice. And this individual component of speaking can be so mobile that it conveys the finest fluctuations of the inner life of the speaker. When we speak, these contrasting sets of qualities interact—one objective, shared, and not subject to the state, qualities, or characteristics of the individual, and the other variable and individual. Speech consisting of these opposites alone would sound peculiar and disjointed were they not integrated by and into a third element—one that is only

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noticeable if there is too much or too little of it: the breath. When voice and speech sounds are fully integrated in the breath, the breath is perceptible only to the trained ear. Beyond what we hear acoustically, we also hear movement and meaning, and their contrasting qualities are akin to those pertaining to voice and consonants, respectively. In all aspects of movement that accompany speaking—gesture, stance, facial expression, eye movement—we experience something of the individual person. On the other hand, the meaning of what is said—for example, in a story, driving directions, instructions for assembling a desk, a baking recipe—is objective and shared by all.

When Homer describes the travels of Odysseus, he doesn’t expound on how he feels about it all, but cites—retells, recites—these travels and adventures. He tells the story. Through such epic, narrative poetry, the world speaks. In Wordsworth’s calling out, “My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky,” we hear his enthusiasm and engagement. Of course, sky and rainbow are objectively present in the world; yet what we hear above all is the joy of the individual. In lyric poetry, the soul speaks, declaiming, literally “calling out,” and conveying inner movement.

In each of these two there is an element of the other. The narrative mode presupposes the interest and engagement of the individual speaker, while in the lyrical style the soul gives voice to a relationship to the outer world. In both there is a conversation between individual and world, with one of the elements heard more prominently. It is also possible that in this conversation neither the world nor the individual predominates, but that these are equally engaged. In dramatic poetry or in drama, the tension between inner and outer constitutes the drama itself.

The Art of Speech

“Excuse me; how do I get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Practice, practice, practice.”

As an art, the spoken word concerns what meets our senses, conveying that which would

otherwise remain beyond the senses, or supersensible. What lives in the word and would otherwise remain invisible thus makes its appearance in the sense world and can be experienced as such. Just as playing notes on the cello is not yet music, and applying paint to a canvas is not yet a work of art, speaking a poem is not yet the art of the spoken word. Like the other arts, this, too, is to be learned, practiced, and developed. Speech arts are among the so-called “time arts” in Waldorf education, along with eurythmy, drama, music (choral and instrumental), and puppetry. These arts take place in time and engage us in cultivating a relationship to time, to living in and with time.

Since the beginnings of the artistic impulse for the renewal of living language, issuing from the work of Rudolf Steiner and Marie Steiner-von Sivers, this work has grown substantially. Today more than 700 trained speech artists are engaged in pedagogical, therapeutic, and performing endeavors.

The work of the pedagogically trained speech artist in a Waldorf school, most often in Europe, has developed over decades to encompass the following practice:

- Regular, individual sessions with class teachers—for example, once a week for one semester per year
- Individual or group practice with special subject teachers—foreign language and eurythmy, for example
- Work with classes to model speech work for the teacher in the rhythmic part of main lesson
- Pedagogical and therapeutic work with individual students
- Assistance with class plays in lower school and drama teaching and production in high school
- Parent education
- Artistic contributions to festivals
- Work with the faculty as a whole, consisting of artistic practice and pedagogical considerations

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Because speech works so deeply into a human being—affecting our soul condition, physiology, consciousness, and even health—it must, like any other pedagogical measure, be undertaken responsibly. For this reason, teachers are prepared for this in teacher education, and need also thereafter to be regularly supported in this aspect of their work by a fully trained speech artist, one with a recognized diploma and the requisite background.

This full training for speech artists typically consists of a four-year program leading to a diploma upon demonstration of competence. This artistic foundation can be followed by post-graduate work, further preparing speech artists to go into one or more of the three main areas of activity: performance (theater, speaking for eurythmy,

poetry recitals), therapeutic application (anthroposophical medical practices, clinics, and hospitals in the treatment of developmental disorders, constitutional conditions, attention problems, exhaustion, anemia, respiratory disorders, eating disorders, psychiatric disorders, or eye ailments), and pedagogical work, particularly in

Waldorf schools and teacher education.

Preparing teachers for speech work in the classroom has, for decades, been served by providing a sufficient foundation so that, with refresher courses, teachers can develop inner resources from which to cultivate speech work in their classes.

To enable teachers in North America to integrate speech into their daily preparation and teaching the project *Speech and Drama in Waldorf Schools in North America* (formerly *in the West*) was created in 1994. This was done in response to teachers asking how one might build on this aspect of teacher training and develop this component of Waldorf education in their schools.

The Project: Speech and Drama in Waldorf Schools in North America

This project for the development of the many facets of speech integral to Waldorf education is now approaching its fourteenth year. The human and professional interest and support from faculty and staff of numerous Waldorf schools, the

Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), Waldorf school consultants, and others connected to the Waldorf school movement and its development have been invaluable. I am grateful to have worked with more than one hundred each of grades one through eight. Work with high school classes has also been a component of the project, although less extensive, as many of the schools where the work has taken place do not have high schools.

The project *Speech and Drama in Waldorf Schools in North America* has as its purpose the cultivation of speech and drama based on the work of Rudolf Steiner and Marie Steiner-von Sivers and further developed in its pedagogical application by trained speech artists in European Waldorf schools over many decades. Building on this foundation, the project seeks forms that are workable and compatible with our circumstances here and now, while also taking seriously and building upon what has been developed so far. The project endeavors to enable teachers to continue speech practice begun in teacher education and to apply this art age-specifically in the classroom while also cultivating their own relationship to living language.

From its first years, when some schools found remarkable ways to fund this aspect of their faculty development, through the ensuing years that have benefited from generous funding as schools developed budget lines for this work, the project has conducted speech work of one to several weeks in nearly forty schools. Many have integrated this annually into their schedules, budgets, and pedagogical-artistic practices. For example, one school has employed a speech artist two days a week for twelve weeks each school year. Another school sponsored a speech artist for four to six full weeks annually, resulting in the creation of a part-time position for speech.

The project spans the following areas:

- Speech in the rhythmic part of main lesson. These sessions are intended to support class teachers' ongoing speech practice by demonstrating how exercises and poems can be introduced and developed so that they engender the kind of inner activity that supports the development of students at each stage.
- Work with early childhood teachers and assistants, primary school teachers, and high

school teachers. Individual sessions provide teachers with some artistic tools to apply to ongoing speech work. We also begin preparing other pieces—exercises, poetry, prose—to be used in the near future. It is also an opportunity to cultivate a teacher's own speech and to address concerns about specific children

- Assistance with class plays in lower school and drama in high school
- Work with individual children
- Parent education, often open to the larger community
- Sessions with office staff
- An hour's work with the entire faculty during each week of a speech visit. This includes artistic practice, study, and pedagogical considerations
- A public speaking course for high school students

Speech in Teacher Education

The long-standing, classical set-up of two classes a week for two years is reasonable for an introduction to the main areas that a teacher will have to build on throughout his or her teaching years. As this frequency is not always possible, we need to find other forms of supporting teachers in this respect.

Many teachers now report that student teachers increasingly lack understanding, skill, and even intention regarding recitation or speech exercises. As this has been the case for some years, many of these earlier teacher trainees are now teachers hosting current trainees.

Why Speech Work?

1. The humanizing process of education hinges on and presupposes a teacher's ongoing practice of inner development. Rudolf Steiner presented how and why this takes place through cultivating a connection to the living word.
2. We are the model of speech for our students.
3. For school-age children, a teacher's speaking is one of the most prominent and important sense impressions; it is a lens and gateway to the world and works formatively right into the physiology of the organs.

4. Teachers need to know how to choose texts and exercises to work on with their students at various stages of their development. They need to know how this work furthers a teacher's overall pedagogical intentions for the class and what the artistic tools are that bring this to realization.

The "how" involves elements, styles, qualities, and tools belonging to the art of the spoken word, which means that teachers and students require practice to develop new capacities. One must experience the effects of the different artistic components. Teachers will want to handle this responsibly, as it constitutes part of the overall pedagogical gesture affecting the well-being of both student and teacher.

Some Further Considerations

Hearing the children speak is a valuable and wonderful way to know the children—who they are and how they are doing. We acquire this perceptiveness through our own artistic practice. There has been a sharp increase in the degree to which our visual attention is over-taxed and our hearing development and auditory attention are undermined. At stake are the inner space and the social awareness particular to the sense of hearing. Speech also precedes and furthers reading and writing.

For Future's Sake

We must come to a greater grasp of language if we are not to lose access to the spiritual world.

— Rudolf Steiner

The art of speech in Waldorf education, as a daily practice in the rhythmic part of main lesson and as it infuses the entire day with enhanced human presence, fosters interest in the world and a place of reference in the soul. This furthers healthy breathing and the transitions between inner and outer worlds, bringing presence, participation, and health to a process that can be fraught with challenges. At the heart of our own sense of self and integrity is a sound relationship with the world. In this sense, the living word keeps us integrated. It enables children and older students to embrace their lives and feel, "Here I am; this is the world, this is my life; and this is where I want to be with everyone who is here with me now."

Helen Lubin, M.A., trained in Germany at Novalis School for Speech and Drama and at the School for Speech and Artistic Speech Therapy. After several years' teaching in Germany and at the School for Pedagogical and Therapeutic Speech, Switzerland, she returned to the U.S. in 1991. In 1994 she founded the project, Speech and Drama in Waldorf Schools in North America. She is an adjunct faculty member of Rudolf Steiner College and a former Waldorf school student.