

Excerpts from “Tilling the Soil of the European Higher Education Area”

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The following excerpts describe an ongoing effort in Europe to create a trans-national Master's program in Waldorf education. The author, John Burnett, is a member of the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, U.K. References to the “Bologna Declaration” and the “Lisbon Process” concern larger attempts to ease transfer of credits and in other ways support higher education across European national boundaries.¹

— Editor

...In November 2002, partners representing five Steiner and Waldorf teacher education centers set themselves the task of designing and validating a European Masters program, grounded in principles of participant action research. Their aim was to produce a program acceptable to the education systems of all participating member countries across language and cultural boundaries. Prompted by the Bologna Declaration² and the Lisbon Process,³ representatives of the four European centers made a successful collaborative bid, together with the University of Plymouth, for a three-year European Cooperation Project, funded by the European Commission under the Comenius scheme. The centers involved were: Waldorf Tanártovábbképzés, Hungary; Hogeschool Helicon, Netherlands; Rudolf Steinerhögskolan, Sweden; and Witten-Annen Institut für Waldorfpädagogik, Germany. Participants in the program would be teachers and administrators working in the context of the Steiner Waldorf integrated and holistic education method.⁴

...Described as a “green field site” by an official of the European Union’s Socrates program, the project offered scope within the Comenius Education and Training scheme⁵ for realizing some of its overall objectives: the reinforcement of the European dimension of school education; the encouragement of trans-national cooperation between schools; improved professional development of staff, and the promotion of intercultural awareness.

...Now, four years later, with the project complete and actual programs of study starting up in different European countries, it is possible to comment, retrospectively, on the achievements, setbacks, and some of the formative ideas that have shaped such a convergent model of higher education, particularly in the context of developing collaborative school-based action research in a global climate.

...By establishing a system of transferable credits for completed levels and by removing current obstacles to the universal recognition of degrees, politicians and analysts have argued that mobility, cooperation, and quality assurance can be promoted throughout the European area.⁶ Without these qualities, Europe stands to fall behind its competitors in the rapidly expanding global market for higher education, a market increasingly dominated by North America, Australia, and Southeast Asia. The project members ... resolved to confront these challenges and explore the possibilities of networking their own action-research programs across the European Education area.

The Bologna Declaration, universally agreed to by twenty-nine ministers, committed to establishing a European Area of Higher Education by 2010. The detailed realization of its aim, that of bringing about progressive convergence of the overall framework of higher education in Europe to easily readable and comparable degrees,

1. The complete article and full references are available at: http://www.steinerwaldorfma.org/papers/PRAR_Paper_JB_11_05.doc.

2. European Commission (a) 2005.

3. Education Europe 2005.

4. Clouder, C. and M. Rawson 1999.

5. Europa 2006.

6. Bekhradnia 2004.

remains complex and problematic as individual states and institutions struggle to overcome conservatism and resistance to change within their own national systems and ways of working.⁷ Having already in place a flexible system of cultural exchange, the group of Waldorf teacher educators was confident that they would be able to develop a practical network to facilitate participatory-research and critical discourse between schools and institutions in Europe. They believed such a network had the potential to transcend traditional political and bureaucratic boundaries and would begin to meet what was becoming an evident need within the international Waldorf community—a need for deeper critical evaluation and research and an active culture of inquiry directed towards classroom practice and administration.

...Developing a European Masters program based on networking and cultural interchange seemed to the partners a worthwhile if challenging enterprise. At the same time, they needed to acquire expertise and experience as well as guidance regarding the principles on which such a program could be effectively developed. The decision of the Project Steering Committee to integrate the project into the University of Plymouth's Integrated Masters Program was significant in the way it informed the subsequent design and concept of the Masters. A flexible, teacher-centered and outcome-based approach was clearly attractive to communities of educators far beyond the U.K. and generated considerable interest across the European Education Area. There was an obvious need for teaching and learning pathways that offered professional development and motivated practical research within the classroom. The project partners underwent training as "university approved tutors" and incorporated principles of flexible distributed learning into the teaching and management structure of the program. A Student Manual, designed around the structure and regulatory framework of the Integrated Masters Program while reflecting the distinct values and principles of Waldorf pedagogy, was presented at an International Dissemination Day in Brussels at the conclusion of the design phase of the project. With the completion of the design phase in 2006,

the partners realized their primary objective, and the initiative found itself poised to move from design to the realization of actual programs.

What started as an idea and ideal has begun to be tested as a reality. Projects such as the European Masters for Steiner Waldorf Educators can be conceived and designed with great care but, as is usually the case with collaborative activity, unpredictable elements almost certainly introduce change and uncertainty into the development process. The original partners, having worked for three years on the idea of a collaborative program, were surprised to find European study pathways developing independently from the scheme originally envisaged. Rather than seeing the development of a series of linked programs working together within a broad cultural and administrative network, partner institutions found themselves having to engage in separate negotiations with the awarding institution (University of Plymouth) without the support or involvement of an over-arching collaborative network. As a practical way of ensuring safe, manageable partnerships, it is understandable that individually negotiated arrangements between institutions would need to be set up, but there is a real danger that such arrangements work against the very principles that inspired the original project. Communicative freedom and communicative action derived from mutual understanding and consensus are likely to be severely constrained when embedded in the hierarchical structure of corporate culture. In retrospect, "market forces" and the managerial apparatus of quality assurance can be experienced as influences which, inevitably, compromise idealistic notions of global networking, reducing theoretical ideals to pragmatic arrangements that have primarily a business character.

In the light of the above, the five European partners at present find themselves with limited freedom to engage in action-research across the free cultural network they envisaged, but there is still optimism about what can ultimately be achieved through dialogue with corporate higher education. Apart from a pilot program currently being explored in the U.K., it is in the Netherlands that the first European Steiner Waldorf program is being developed under the auspices of the Integrated Masters Program, and partners look

7. Higher Education Policy Institute 2005.

with interest at the process by which this new initiative comes to birth. (Outside the European Union, a successful M.A. in Education, taught and assessed in the German language in Switzerland, has also been instigated by the University of Plymouth.) A further M.A. in Eurythmy is being developed in Sweden. All three programs support practitioner action-research and reflect the core principles of Steiner's pedagogy. At the same time, they are embedded in the over-arching concept and structure of an accredited university post-graduate degree.

...The development of the European Masters project has raised new questions, namely, how can the home institution be sure about the quality of work produced by students studying and writing in a mother tongue which is not English in a country hundreds of miles away from the main campus? In particular, how can the fruits of participant action research be communicated in forms that generate confidence and are "quality-assurance-proof"? In the sphere of participant research, definitions of language and acknowledgment of subjectivities are particularly important and there is a danger that nuances of meaning can be obscured through translation. How does a translator deal with a piece of work in which the writer's language fails to express ideas clearly or is of a poor standard? Unless the translator is highly skilled, there is a temptation for the text to be "revised upwards" to a more standard English if the home language piece is written in a weak or incoherent style. Translation and quality assurance across national and cultural borders is expensive and potentially inhibitive for national partners in developing European countries.

In an international collaborative partnership using more than one language for assessment, the role of the External Examiner is crucial. Such a person needs to be not only fluent in both languages being used but, ideally, familiar with the academic traditions and conventions of the different national institutions. This person also needs to understand the complex nature of practitioner action research and its evaluation. Above all, there is a factor of professional trust which all partners need to exercise regarding assessment when multi-lingual scripts are in use. This process has been recognized and formalized by the Quality Assurance Agency in its precepts regard-

ing collaborative partnerships.⁸ Continuing work with national accreditation agencies such as the *National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom* (NARIC); the *Informationsstelle für Anerkennungsfragen*, Switzerland; and the *Afdeling Diplomawaardering & Certificering*, Netherlands, serves to explore and negotiate qualification equivalents between national regulatory systems.

...The concept of school-improvement married to practitioner-research in a flexible, school-based program built around the needs of teachers is beginning to take root in Europe. Inquiries regarding action research Masters programs for Steiner Waldorf educators are coming in from different countries across Europe and as far afield as South Africa and the United States, indicating a real need for international post-graduate programs able to offer flexible, distributed learning in the context of continuing professional development. Continuing the agricultural analogy used in the title of this paper, it seems fair to conclude that the efforts of the project team over the past three years have involved learning how to plough new furrows in wilderness country. There has also been an element of striving to rejuvenate tired, impacted soil in a climate of post-modern uncertainty and shifting values. Two decades ago, new impulses regarding participatory action research promised:

...a view that education is a task of emancipation from irrationality, injustice, and unproductive and unsatisfying forms of life. It is a task of learning not just how to think but also how not to think; not just what appears to be true or right but also what it is false or wrong to believe; not just what appears to be conducive to the smooth running of government or industry but also what is counter-productive, what leads to suffering, what is alienating or exploitative or oppressive, and what places unjustifiable limits on individual and collective capacities for self-development, self-determination.⁹

The above words serve as a continuing motto for the impulse of the European Masters project and its aim to support educational practice that

8. Quality Assurance Agency 2004.

9. Carr and Kemis 2005.

encourages children to grow as confident world citizens, capable of valuing their own circumstances and background within diversity. Self esteem, respect for the culture, values and traditions of others, tolerance and understanding are essential qualities for the unfolding of individual potential as is a commitment to lifelong learning.¹⁰

By way of contrast, reflecting a different voice in the changing climate of 21st century thinking, Elliot¹¹ argues that “becoming critical is not enough to become empowered as a change agent.” His argument, that “critiques that promote critical self-reflection do not necessarily translate into empowering people to take action for the sake of an ideal,” stands as an admonition for would-be idealists who wish to contribute to the development of a direction for education appropriate to our time.

For seeds to germinate and flourish there need to be warmth and light combined with a dark and well-structured soil. For three years the partners in the Masters project have worked to provide both elements in the context of the European Education Area. It is their hope that the harvest will be rich.

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10. steinerwaldorfma.org 2006.

11. Elliot 2005.