Outline of a Study Methodology

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Introduction

Study is expected of faculty and college work in Waldorf schools. Most schools incorporate studies into various meetings, and it is generally understood that the study is meant to be a tool for ongoing professional development to deepen the faculty's understanding of anthroposophy, of the curriculum, and of children taken individually or as a class. When successful, the study portion of meetings is enlivening and satisfying.

All too often, however, the study can fall short of its promised potential. The reading of texts, in particular, feels like a slog through molasses. The hours following the end of school are not ideal for a first encounter with demanding texts, and the discussions, if they happen at all, may not reach far beyond a surface understanding of the material. An unintended consequence of a poor study may be an aversion to the material among the faculty, particularly those who have not previously experienced a fulfilling study during the course of their teacher preparation.

Over the past few years, I have had the good fortune to lead studies of basic pedagogical texts (such as Rudolf Steiner's *Study of Man*) and some other anthroposophical literature in various settings. From the successes and failures of these studies, a basic approach has emerged, which I offer here in the spirit of research into effective practices.

Study Sequence

In the studies I have led with practicing or prospective teachers, we have taken up the text in a sequence of four phases:

1. Summary. Every participant reads (silently) through the text until a theme seems to have been presented more or less fully to the reader. This usually requires reading between one paragraph and two pages. The student (as the participating teacher will from now be designated) then writes a paraphrase of the content of the theme in his/her own words, condensing the text to about 10-20% of its original length. The best summaries are written as if the writer is the original speaker, and not in the third person (not "Steiner says" but the content itself). When done well, this phase by itself is immensely helpful. Rather than "sleeping into" the content, as so often happens when one reads a demanding text, one is forced to move back and forth between reading and thinking, and thinking and writing. This "breathing" rhythm, in as much as it works through the rhythmic system, encourages comprehension to emerge. Further, the summary remains a reference resource for the student who prepared it. Since it is time-consuming, this phase may take a faculty or college several meetings to complete. However, once a section has been summarized, it will not take a student long to pick up the thread of thought when s/he returns to the text. Alternatively, the person leading the study may divide the text into sections (according to themes) ahead of time and assign each participant one section to summarize. In this approach, the group can have the whole lecture or text summarized quickly, but, of course, each person will have read and summarized only a section of the whole.

A summary of the first five pages in *Balance in Teaching*, Lecture 1, is added at the end of this article as a sample. It is not practical to add the original text here, but it can be downloaded for free from the archive section of Steinerbooks.org.

2. Movement of the Themes. Each student identifies (in writing, in the same notebook used for the summary) the main themes of the text s/he previously summarized. Each theme is identified in a few words, following the author's sequence. The participants then share their sequences, making changes or additions to their own work if they so desire. It is not necessary for everyone to agree on what should be considered the movement of the themes, but others' perspectives can be helpful. A variation on this phase, suggested to me by Douglas Gerwin, has each participant articulate one summary segment while linking his/her summary to the one offered previously by another participant. Now each student tries to "see" the whole text (lecture or section of a book) as a movement of themes. By repeating the series of themes in one's mind a few times, a sequence emerges that was previously only dimly sensed. By knowing where the text is "heading," the student can see connections and thereby learn not only from the details but also from the artistic construction of the text as an entirety. This phase brings the text into movement, giving the student a bird's-eye view of the whole. It allows a new mobility to grow in the thinking of each participant. Parts of the text acquire a new significance through their connection with the totality, much as a second reading of a novel gives a context for individual events and personalities that one could have easily missed at the first reading. A conversation at this point is often brimming with new ideas and insights. This phase can also be repeated at the completion of the entire text, so that a similar large viewpoint can grow of how the whole text is, in a sense, one statement.

3. Artistic Transformation. Each student transforms one or all of the themes (depending on how the group wishes to proceed) into an artistic representation. This can be an image, a stanza of poetry, or a visual form (drawing/painting). Poetry and images work particularly well for meetings, since they do not require props or changes in the physical space, but any artistic "language" is fine. (It is entirely conceivable that movement, music, or sculpture work equally well, but I have not experienced those and therefore do not include examples of them here.) This phase calls upon the student to give the ideas within the text a new vestment, incorporating his/her relationship with those ideas more clearly into the foreground. It is usually a lively and energizing step. If each student transforms all of the themes into artistic representations, s/he will have an artistic rendering of an entire lecture. If the group divides the lecture or text so that each student works with one theme, then the group as a whole will have that complete artistic rendering by the end of this process. Groups can be playful with this phase, experimenting with different approaches to keep the surprising and engaging explorations lively.

4. Question Leading to Contemplation. Each participant picks a theme that speaks particularly strongly to him/her, and tries to articulate a genuine question in relation to that theme. It is not easy to find true questions. Seemingly simple ones often work the best. One should avoid asking questions that are meant to set the stage for one's knowledge to shine forth and seek instead for those questions that leave the group in an open, not-knowing state. If successful, this phase opens the door to new insights, gained through a period of quiet contemplation. Questions can be held inwardly, captured in a representative word or sound, and then eliminated altogether for short periods, leaving behind a receptive attentiveness as a vessel for new "drops of light." They can be shared, preferably in a quiet, contemplative mood. The actual contemplation can be undertaken in the group or left for each one to practice at home. If the group has a working relationship with contemplative periods during

meetings, then it can take up one theme and have everybody approach it contemplatively at the same time, or have a contemplative period during which each member engages with his/her individual question.

As mentioned earlier, this methodology is offered in the spirit of research into effective practices. I welcome reflections or suggestions as to its efficacy.

Summary Sample

Balance in Teaching, Lecture 1 (pp. 1–5)

Teachers must have a deep feeling for the nature of the esoteric. Much of what will make an educator effective has to be guarded as a sacred possession within the circle of the faculty. [It is not to be discussed in public.]

Education is concerned with cultivating the three soul forces of the next generation; those have to be prepared for accomplishing the tasks of the future. Humanity brought itself to its present (1920) state of misery because it has made itself dependent on the mode of thinking that originated in the West. Herbert Spencer is a representative of this mode, whose influence on education has led to the precise opposite of what education should entail.

Spencer wants the instruction of children to be a preparation for future specialization (as a scientist, e.g.), but that is exactly the worst possible approach to education. Future specialization is in essence a question of talent, that is, of karma. The education of children should be geared towards the essential humanity of all children, not towards the karmic gifts of a few. In fact, a teacher would be educating better if s/he tried to make sure that a child WOULD NOT be able to specialize in a given field of instruction.

When a specialized training is considered an appropriate preparation for teaching, then the teacher cuts a comic figure in front of the class. In fact, education should be its own specialty, and training in science is not a preparation for pedagogical work.

The confusion between pedagogy and research originated in the universities and has made its way down through the high schools into the elementary schools.

Reference

Steiner, Rudolf. *Balance in Teaching*. Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2007.

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