"Building Inner Fire" Independent Working and Learning: Teaching through Projects

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(This is an excerpt.)

Dovetailing school and life, practicing self-efficacy, learning in an exemplary, long-lasting manner, nurturing the individual, teaching based on projects offers new forms of instruction.

Non scholae, sed vitae discimus We learn, not for school but for life. This phrase is often heard, but in reality it looks more like learning is for school rather than for life. Students cram their vocabulary lists for the test, homework is done to avoid trouble with the teacher, and the main lesson book is often created to receive a favorable mention in the report. Such behaviors will probably never be eliminated from the school routine as long as one does not completely restructure school (for example, school of life) or make attendance voluntary, as does Summerhill.

Yet there are a few forms of teaching that enable us to bring life into the school, or rather, to productively interrelate school and life, and even more, "to build inner fire" (Rudolf Steiner), for example, the student-company (compare with the African business of Fr. Wutte[1]) that can accompany the business or social practicum, and teaching based on projects, which ideas will be more closely illuminated in the following pages.

Projects: From Photography to a Japanese Garden

Within the parameters of a project on digital photography, a ninth grade class took photos of all the classes and sold commissioned orders of the photos. The Nuthe River, the body of water closest to our school, was investigated by a class with respect to its physical, chemical, and biological characteristics. A

twelfth grade class completed a class play, including all the related aspects of props, stage construction, costumes, directing, creating the program, and public relations. In a project called "Open Studio" each student could realize his or her idea in wood, metal or clay, having the time available as well as the advice of both teachers and fellow students. Eighth graders visited residents in a home for the elderly over a period of months. Two students instructed a group of seventh to twelfth graders for five periods a day during a project week on cooking and making chocolate candies. A group of tenth to twelfth graders planned and created a school calendar for the next year. Another group planned and created a Japanese Garden of Silence. These are all examples of projects that have taken place at our school.

Under the concept "Project Instruction" (or "Project Teaching"), different people understand different things. Many insist that one can only speak of projects when the themes and methods are freely chosen by the students. Others feel that connections outside of the school justify this label. And others speak of projects when one is unsure of what will arise out of a few lessons, or because they want to support the students on an uncertain course. It should be understood that Project Teaching is instruction that:

1. takes place over a specified number of hours,
2. has space available,
3. is under the guidance of one or more special subject teacher(s) or, when appropriate, specialists from outside,
4. is concentrated around a project and often with a previously-determined outcome,
5. has an out-of-school reference or not,
6. in some cases, uses forms of work atypical of school work,
7. has possibilities for students to make decisions, or to be involved in the decision-making process,
8. has partly presupposed abilities, as well as partly abilities to be practiced or to be newly acquired,
9. is usually concluded with a presentation and an evaluation.

Aspects which are more loosely defined include: questions of elective or compulsory participation, the homogeneity of the participants (or groups of students across different grade levels), the substantive consequences, the sustainability of the results, the documentation of the course of the project, and assessment (in some cases, grading) of the student's report.

Advantages of Project Instruction

Well-understood project instruction requires a paradigm shift for those who are responsible. While we otherwise have often been the king or queen in our own class kingdom, behind closed classroom doors, now there arise questions of teamwork and different forms of cooperation. This requires thorough planning and arrangements and oftimes creates friction. In the marionette theatre project in our seventh grade, the children finished the dolls and scenery in the handwork lessons, dressed the dolls under the guidance of the handwork teacher, wrote out the story and practiced effective speaking in German lessons, and thought out the appropriate background music in music class. All this could be achieved only through interdisciplinary learning and working.

Project Teaching allows teachers to offer themes—building a canoe, creating a picture book, setting up a student library, learning to dance—other than their usual subjects and to arrange complex courses of working, such as the planning and development of an object of utility (a canoe) or an exhibit based on a theme of local history. For this last project we worked with a local institution, called "Linden 54," a memorial for victims of political violence in the 20th century in Potsdam. Places of learning and institutions outside of the school can meaningfully lighten the work of the teachers. Local institutions such as archives, and organizations such as Bund-Jugend (an organization in Germany working with young people for environmental causes), and so forth, are usually very open and ready to help when one wants to do research with children and young people.

Also one can achieve much working together with other schools. A byproduct can be a reduction in stereotypes of "the Waldorf (students)"—these local contacts serve public relations not least of all! And moreover, our children and young people have opportunities to leave the shelter of their own school and anchor themselves more strongly in their part of the city, their own neighborhoods. The support of the parents would be necessary for this. As soon as an out-of-school relationship develops, the relevance for life is enhanced. This works positively on motivation.

Motivation Arising from the Matter at Hand

If someone wishes to create a school calendar, he must concern himself with questions of layout. In making a documentary film, one must consider related media and tasks such as editing, background music, incorporation of titles, and so forth, not because these capacities are in some lesson plan, but because they are demanded by the task at hand. So on one side, school subjects and methods (mathematics, spelling, handwork…) are applied to real life. On the other side, methods and content that are not typical for school, that is, for Waldorf schools,

can be brought in for projects. Interest in these things increases the students' motivation, as does the ability to make their own choices. The meaning of each step in the process arises out of the task—the opposite of learning that is reduced to teaching to the test or cramming unrelated facts. If, however, freedom in working has not been practiced, the unaccustomed freedom can easily lead to too many breaks, as has been observed in Waldorf seminarians. [reference unknown]

In earlier times, our small upper grades were able to get to know each other better and make new friends through projects that spanned across different grades. A student who is developmentally delayed can instruct younger students, a new experience for him—so in relationship to these younger students, he takes up a new, different role from that in which he has been firmly held for many long years together with his class (the shadow side of being together for twelve years).

Further, when the final product of my project will not end up gathering dust on a shelf somewhere, but rather be eaten by others as chocolate candy, or be enjoyed by the school community for years as a place of quiet, then one must really do one's best. This becomes clear to the students. Participation in competitions adds to the motivation.

Engage me actively…

"Tell me, and I will forget it. Show me, and I will remember. Engage me actively, and I will understand it!" (Lao Tse) Project Instruction demands a high degree of independent working and personal responsibility from the students. The experience teaches that the learning efficiency of the link between doing and knowing has a very long-lasting effect. Years later one hears, "We did that once in a project on …"

In addition, we can bring the students, as consumers of instruction, into the process of forming the lessons, thus practicing democratic principles. This begins when we take up the students' wishes for project themes, continues as the students make suggestions for problem-solving, and ends by easing the teacher's workload. I am not the one who has to correct every page of a growing body of documentation, but rather I can delegate this assistance to another student, even if only the more obvious spelling errors are caught, and confine myself to the final correction. When a student is more competent than I in a particular realm, I can allow myself to be helped, perhaps even work in partnership with a twelfth grader to lead a project.[2] More and more often I personally use real dialogue—also in my "regular" lessons—to give the older students shared responsibility for our arrangements. This seems to me to be appropriate also in light of the child-rearing practices of parents today.

I can also give up a portion of responsibility through peer evaluations, or evaluation of intermediate results, by fellow classmates. This, however,

presupposes a discussion about criteria for quality. Students generally are inclined to be more sharply critical than to indulge in the infamous "Waldorf praise" ("You have done that very nicely!"). One practices a way of looking at the strengths instead of fixating on the weaknesses. Our goal would be to have the young people even learn to write their own reports, which we would validate with our signature if we thought they were correct. The experience of the Potsdam Waldorf School with end-of-year portfolios in mathematics for grades ten through twelve shows that this is not merely wishful thinking. Now the European End-of-School Portfolio Project (Comenius-EPC-Projekt) envisions the greatest possible independence of the students in its standards for portfolio-reflection and evaluation, and calls upon the teachers to facilitate this competence.[3]

In designing our concluding reports for our middle grades (in Brandenburg, advanced vocational training for grade ten and high school in grade eleven), we found we could calculate one third of the final grades from the final grades for the projects, and for artistic courses, sharpening our Waldorf profile. With the results of many projects (pieces of artwork, films, portfolios, documentation …) as direct examples of the student's accomplishments (compare R. Iwan, F. Winter), many students have been able to get an apprenticeship or work placement.

Through the project presentations that take place at various times of the year, all the students practice the forms of presentation and speaking before a larger audience. Two older students usually conduct the program as masters of ceremony. In the near future we would like to make the monthly celebrations (*Monatsfeiern*) for the upper grades more attractive. Often we enjoy evening-long presentations such as class plays, readings, and inauguration or openings of exhibitions.

Anthroposophical Study of the Human Being as a Basis for Project Teaching

You see, this is what Spiritual Science wants, what Spiritual Science, as it is intended here, can bring about: Effect a consciousness that is not just for the understanding, but that also goes into the feeling life and the will.

> To be sure, one hears over and over again the demand, particularly in the pedagogical realm, that teaching should not be just for the acquisition of knowledge, but rather it should lead to capacities, to work, it should build the will. …To be sure, there is a lot of good will present, when today [1919] people say we should not educate for knowledge, we should educate for the capacity to work, for abilities. But good will is not enough; we must have the strength to enlighten this good will, to bring the light of real insight. …No, it has to do with

> the fact that we must attain the possibility of working with such insights, such imaginations, and such concepts that have within themselves the power to work over into the will, to build the inner fire for the will. This is needed to heal the present that is sick in many aspects, to turn it in the right direction in the second social-pedagogical realm. …The other realm … is that, of which I would like to say, it should facilitate "teaching of life." …We stand correctly in life when every moment, every day, every week, every year is a source of learning for our further development. We will have come though our school in the best way—no matter how far we come in the school—if we have learned through this school to learn from life.[4]
>
> – Rudolf Steiner

In my opinion, Project Teaching is a form of "teaching of life" appropriate to Waldorf schools. Current themes and methods can always be found in the classes that meet as double periods twice a week, and small teacher-student ratios (we usually have one teacher per ten students) support a wide range of different projects. In the course of the work, resources must be gently used, concepts developed and adapted, steps in the process (for example the purchase of needed material) must be clarified through the comparison of prices. Problems will arise that need to be solved: "Tu-effect" [reference unknown] with a reality-component. A few years ago, under the theme of "China," middle grades students experienced various projects such as calligraphy, cooking, geography, and building a dragon, so that many senses were activated. The conclusion was turned into a Spring Festival. This form of learning, long-lasting and meeting the requirements of the brain, works with the emotions and involvement of all aspects of the human being. It has to do with exemplary learning within the parameters of an expanded experience of life and demands from all participants their presence of mind. Routine cannot be a part of this. It also connects with social learning, not least of which includes cooperation and giving of feedback.

Adults as well as children and young people can bring in things learned outside of school (for example, knowledge of computers, sports or social capacities), and thereby show their personal competence. This can lead to stronger community-building and raises the visibility of the school; for example, a round bench made of wood lasts longer than the students who built it were enrolled at the school. I can learn to rely on the community in instances where I am weak. For example, in the case where I was lacking knowledge about the creation of a website, a father jumped in, so the responsible student could set up the page nicely according to our specifications.[5]

How did the Waldorf curriculum actually come into existence? Through the interpretation of indications and suggestions from Rudolf Steiner, endorsed by him with respect to the teachers at the first Waldorf school between 1919 and 1924. Over the decades, the modernity of that era was not updated. (U. Buermann gave a concrete example of this in speaking about the electric tram, which Steiner saw as an example of ultramodern technology in 1919, and which today in a lesson on modern technology should be expanded to or superceded by the cell phone.) In the tradition that has solidified [over the years], Steiner's basic approach has slipped into the background, "not to practice from memory what one has learned of pedagogy, but rather in every moment standing in front of the human being to find anew the individual method that applies to just this human being."[6] Ninety years later we must dare to take up renewal in the sense of the original idea!

Individualization

Waldorf students often come across to the public as arrogant. In my observation, this is because we are used to always being addressed as individuals. "Subordination" is, for us, a foreign word, and may it remain so. Project Teaching, more than any other form, allows content and method to be "found anew" for the participants and current issues to be addressed. For example, a few years ago we had a ninth grade in which the girls experimented a great deal on their outer appearance and strongly sought after role models. We offered a biography project, separated by gender, creating the possibility for the girls to speak in a protected space about the most varied forms of women's lives.

Many Waldorf students complain about being under-challenged in their instruction.[7] The great possibilities for individualization in Project Teaching help avoid this, in that one can offer tasks for those who can meet increased capacity and responsibility, or allow the students to seek their own tasks, even as far as to co-leadership of a project. In a successful project all the participants experience their own self-efficacy, or self-worth, and then they do not need to dismantle bus stop shelters, for example, to feel that they have left a mark in life.

In a recent upper level Faculty Meeting, we considered whether projects might be allowed to fail, and we came to the idea that one must distinguish between productive and unproductive failures. The failure of an entire project, perhaps because of serious planning errors, leaves only frustration for all concerned—that doesn't help anyone. But in contrast, when someone takes responsibility for the "screw up," perhaps he or she can gain the impulse to work on the causes and, as Beckett said, "fail better" the next time—for the results are never perfect. That requires resilience: to learn how to tackle problems alone, or, as the case may be, to get help in a timely manner, to iron out mistakes, not

to let oneself be discouraged by setbacks, in short, to strengthen one's self-competence.[8] The foundations here are ability to communicate as well as trust in mutual readiness to help.

Practical Implementation

Looking for ways to refresh simple academic skills, such as finding important information in a text, and other skills, we, the faculty at the Potsdam Waldorf School developed this Project Teaching program, at first with thirteen periods in the week, which was too many for single projects, then two running parallel made ten, now eight periods in the week. How did we make the class time in the schedule? Going over the all-school schedule, we gathered two hours from religion (compulsory only up to grade six), two for eurythmy, two for music,[9] and two to four for art—and pooled them in such a way that we had a double period every day. Later we added eurythmy and music back in as electives.

In the middle grades (grades seven through nine in our school), the projects take place Monday morning, Tuesday afternoon, and so on. This alternation allows the art and handwork teachers to take part in both middle- and upper-grades projects. The afternoon project periods can also be used for excursions.

Butter Sandwiches and Raspberry Ice Cream

The requirement that each student should have completed particular projects (of art, nature, science or the humanities) was later rejected by our faculty, because we do not offer the same things every year.

One concern turned out to be valid: What would we do if someone followed his/her own special interest and always chose, for example, only eurythmy projects? Indeed, we did have this situation. Or if someone always enrolled in projects with the character of raspberry ice cream, that is to say, something catchy and apparently without further demands, instead of biting into something requiring a bit more chewing effort, with the character of a butter sandwich? What would we do if, in the elective projects, the offers assumed to be more strenuous or difficult were not taken up? This was our pragmatic solution: Each student has three free wishes, and often he/she finds the right pedagogical place with wish number three. We allow specializations when they are not over-balanced. In individual cases we might counsel the student to the effect that he/she might choose a project that is richer in content or more demanding. But self-responsibility also includes the possibility that the students do not want to perceive this. Nonetheless our goal remains that the adolescents more and more take command of their own learning biography.

Portfolio and Presentation

The portfolio offers comprehensive possibilities of documentation through the selection criteria, evaluation, personal review, and awareness of the learning process. Often, however, another end product stands in the foreground, so that the reflective aspect lives more in conversations. When a student has chosen a project and then he/she cannot participate in other ones, they still like to know what they missed. For this reason the presentations arouse a great deal of interest: What have my classmates accomplished in the projects that I could not take part in? How did they do it? What obstacles did they have to overcome? Here real interest arises.

After a lot of work, but exciting and diverse, and after one has acquired the forms of working with the students, a very rewarding thing happens: This is the short version of project instruction from the point of view of a teacher. In the beginning and with younger classes project learning requires a greater number of teachers to guide or lead the projects, because many different, unfamiliar activities are running parallel. Courage is also needed, for one does not always have everything under control, and must be constantly learning oneself. But the process of working together can be highly satisfying and, on all sides, "building inner fire."

Notes

1. See Nyendo: "Service in Africa," in: *Erziehungskunst* 1/2010, page 33f.
2. See "Students and Teachers. Report of an Experience," S. Hesse with Sebastian Meuren, Arne Döpke, Claas Beck, in: *Erziehungskunst* June/2005, pages 649–654.
3. See EAP/EPC Users' Handbook; in preparation at the time of this article. A report was to appear in *Erziehungskunst* June/July 2011.
4. R. Steiner: *Idee und Praxis der Waldorfschule* (GA 297). From a lecture given on September 24, 1919. See translator's note below.
5. See our second project on the DDR under: http://umwelt-ddr.argus-potsdam.de.
6. R. Steiner, GA 297, page 152.
7. See N. "Handwork: In Need of Reform? Agenda for a Reform of Waldorf Schools," in: *Erziehungskunst* 6/2007, pages 691–693.
8. See Götte/Loebell/Maurer: *Entwicklungsaufgaben und Kompetenzen. Zum Bildungsplan der Waldorfschule [Developmental Tasks and Skills: Towards a Building Plan for Waldorf Schools].* Stuttgart, Freies Geistesleben, 2009, pages 170 and passim.
9. Our considerations were that there was a large gap in musical abilities among the students and we wanted to avoid compulsory eurythmy.

Translator's note: Footnotes 4 and 6 refer to a book by Steiner, *Idee und Praxis der Waldorfschule*, (GA 297); a lecture from September 24, 1919. I could not find this book in English. Neither CW 297 (*The Spirit of the Waldorf School*) nor CW 297a (*Education for Life: Self-education and Educational Practice*) seem to be the same book. CW 297 does not have the lecture of 9/24/1919, and I cannot locate an on-line version of CW 297a.

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