The Limitations of Lifeboats

Douglas Gerwin

Earlier this year, as Waldorf institutes and schools were pivoting almost overnight towards online courses, I wrote a piece in which I compared the abrupt (yet necessary) switch from face-to-face format to online platforms to the leap from a crippled cruise liner into life-saving lifeboats (see special edition of *Center & Periphery* of 5 May 2020).

Now, six months into the COVID-19 outbreak, we find ourselves bobbing on the open high seas of education with as yet no clear view of safe harbor on the horizon. Some passengers in our programmatic lifeboats can be heard bemoaning the loss of what they once enjoyed in earlier times, but other participants—among them members of a younger generation of teachers—are voicing their approbation of this new pedagogical vehicle, at least for adult learning. Some are even venturing to say they are enjoying the ride and preferring it to what went before.

From teachers in training (and even some of my colleagues) I hear, "Break-out groups make it so much more possible to contribute to class discussion"; or "I really appreciate the convenience of studying out of my own home"; or "This is saving me a bundle of money." One trainee, in a moment of frustration this past summer, blurted out: "You old guys are complaining only because you can't find your way around online platforms!" To summarize this view—in the words of a political flashpoint heard around the world earlier in the year—the message being delivered to those who regret the switch to online courses is: "Get over it!"

For the moment, I will set aside the pros and cons of online school for children and adolescents and focus instead on the learning and training of adults. For many of them, the advantages of online learning are hard to deny. Those who sign up for this kind of program generally find it is:

- Less expensive – in tuition, but also in associated costs like travel, room & board, childcare
- More convenient – because it can be experienced in the comforts of home
- More accessible – for reasons already mentioned, and because you can log on from anywhere
- Shorter – by necessity, because the medium requires concentrated and motionless attention that can be sustained only for short periods of time
- More efficient – since a single class can be linked to countless supplementary sites and Google folders and videos and other resources
- More likely to be up-to-date – for the reasons of its efficiency
- More participatory in discussions – for instance, in utilizing break-out groups and other features of online platforms
- More widely networked – in that you may be able to connect with students from any culture and across all time zones (assuming some don't mind taking classes during the night)
- Safer – both in terms of physical health risks and protection from social unrest
- Easier to capture a class (or a phrase) you missed – just click on the recording and rerun!
- Easier to hold instructors accountable – recordings are reliable witnesses in the event of a complaint
- More custom-designed (if recorded) – you get to choose your pace of learning

So, why don't Waldorf institutes, many of which proved to be so nimble in adjusting to this medium, hasten to convert their programs entirely into online offerings?

There are many possible answers to this pointed question, starting with the obvious ones about the difference between learning cheek-by-jowl and learning in physical isolation. Think only of the value of choral singing or speaking, for instance, which are physically impossible to arrange and at best can be simulated only through electronic synthesis.

However, here are a few further less commonly articulated considerations:

- Digital devices appeal primarily to the eye, to a lesser degree to the ear. However, we speak of a full experience of Waldorf education as embracing as many as 12 senses. To take but one example: Waldorf education relies heavily on the sense of proprioception (or what is sometimes called "the sense of one's own bodily movement") to deepen an understanding of even the most abstract principles. In one of our courses on collegial relations, movement exercises drawn from the repertoire of "eurythmy in the workplace" are used to understand how social organizations work—or fail to work—in a healthy, coherent way. Of course, one can conduct movement exercises online, but these are less common, and, interestingly enough, they usually require participants to step away—even step out of camera view—to perform them.

- By the same token, digital technology works primarily with the nervous system and in so doing addresses primarily our intellectual cognitive capacities. However, a human being in health and wholeness is endowed with ten bodily systems, and in the ideal, Waldorf education engages all ten – most evidently capacities of feeling through respiration and circulation (heart and lung) and capacities of volition and transformation typified by the digestive system ("gut" learning, we call it). If anything, digital technology tends to tamp down the functions of heart and lung (breathing, for instance, becomes more costal or shallow during extended periods of screen activity), and it can even suppress gut activity below the diaphragm. (Consider video gamers who engage this medium for hours without feeling hungry or the need to take bathroom breaks.)

- Studies have shown that as much as 90 percent of our communication is conducted in ways other than through language. With the help of gesture, physical posture, intonation, facial expressions, and sheer bodily presence we convey far more than the visual/aural medium of digital technology can capture. On this view, we teach—just as we learn—with our entire 10-fold bodily instrument, and yet nine of our ten "strings" remain muted in digital discourse. We exacerbate this limitation by focusing our video cameras, for the most part, on our "talking heads." Like the Ancient Romans, who created the new sculptural form of the dis-embodied bust, we narrow our appearance to our facial features.

- *Education* should not be confused with *instruction*. There is good reason why we speak of "Waldorf Education," not of "Waldorf Instruction." The latter involves conveying information from one place (located in the teacher) to another (located in the student). Digital technology is a superb medium for instruction. By contrast, education (as its Latin etymological heritage suggests) involves a teacher drawing forth from the student something that is already there, albeit slumbering. Like singing into a piano, the note the teacher sings sets in motion corresponding strings stretched across the student's mental and emotional sounding board, sometimes called "heart strings." This is difficult, perhaps impossible, to achieve via the distance of the digital medium, and yet it is key to the practice of Waldorf education. As one Waldorf 12th grader I once interviewed put it, "I get it: Waldorf education is a process of *extracting* students' insights rather than of *inserting* the teacher's knowledge into them!"

In brief, the case for teaching online rests heavily on its undoubted convenience, efficiency, speed, economy, and accessibility. However valuable these considerations may be in matters of instruction, they should not be the deciding factors when it come to education. By design, education is *in*-convenient, *in*-efficient, slow (the very word "school" goes back to a Latin word meaning "leisure"), costly, and, yes, restrictive, in the sense that it presupposes prerequisites, previous experiences or credentials. *Access to education*—fair and open as a human right for all—should not be confused with *accessibility to education*, which (as every college applicant knows) is earned, not guaranteed.

Digital technology is a superb medium for instruction. By contrast, education … involves a teacher drawing forth from the student something that is already there, albeit slumbering.

To be sure, we can expect—more, we should demand—that certain aspects of online learning will find their way into whatever new vessels of education we have yet to envision and eventually construct in future post-pandemic times. Indeed, it would be a tragedy to revert to former ways of learning and remain deaf to the call today for radical innovation and genuine transformation of pedagogical practices and structures

into new forms as yet unimagined. But to adopt digital online formats as the primary new paradigm for learning would be to impoverish education by recasting it as little more than instruction. It would be akin to recasting lifeboats as quasi-permanent houseboats.

Without question, lifeboats provide invaluable transitory service in times of crisis, such as we still experience today. As its name suggests, a lifeboat is designed to save lives, but it is ill-equipped to improve them. For that, we need a pedagogical vessel—an educational home—imbued with a much richer cultural and social and humanly-centered environment. Lifeboats do not make good houseboats.

Douglas Gerwin, *PhD., is Executive Director of the Research Institute for Waldorf Education (RIWE), Executive Director of the Center for Anthroposophy (CfA), and Chair of its Waldorf High School Teacher Education Program (WHiSTEP). In addition, Douglas is a Visiting High School Teacher in life science, history, literature, and music; lecturer and mentor to Waldorf high schools across North America, and Adjunct Professor at Antioch University New England.*