Assessing Distance Learning

The Perspective of a Veteran High School Teacher

David Sloan

> There would be no greater fallacy than to say: "We must rebel against what technical science has brought to us in modern life. . . we must withdraw from this modern life." In a certain respect such an attitude would be an indication of spiritual cowardice. The real remedy lies, not in allowing the forces of the soul to weaken and to withdraw from modern life, but in so strengthening these forces that its pandemonium can be endured.
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> Rudolf Steiner, "Technology and Art"
> December 28, 1914

Until last spring, distance learning had always seemed an alien prospect to many, like bull riding or designing a nuclear submarine or playing the harp. I supposed that a relatively select few were drawn to such pursuits, and by some esoteric means they had managed to acquire the necessary expertise. However, when COVID-19 shuttered the world this past spring, schools in particular, I suddenly found myself joining the ranks of millions of other ill-prepared educators, scrambling to learn in a matter of days the rudiments of online teaching methods. Might Rudolf Steiner have called that leap a modest form of "spiritual courage?"

It's been a rocky transition, especially for a Waldorf teacher who has spent the better part of forty years struggling to understand, and then to implement in his high school lessons, Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical insights into child development. Over the decades I have become, if not a master teacher, at least a practiced one, striving to appeal to young people's longing to be stimulated to think actively, touched to respond empathetically, and inspired to act purposefully.

I have grown to trust my "reading" of my students' daily soul moods more than my hours of preparation when guiding a class, relying on their body language, facial expressions, sidelong glances, and level of engagement to modify the direction of a lesson as needed. I have established a long tradition of beginning classes with playful tongue twisters, as well as group recitations of pertinent poems: Constantine Cavafy's "Ithaka," when studying *The Odyssey*; Dante's "To Every Loving Heart and Captive Soul," when tackling *The Inferno*; excerpts from Whitman's "Song of Myself," when introducing The Birth of American Literature, to name a few.

I encouraged lively debate, respectful discourse, challenging questions. Perhaps most of all—like other striving Waldorf teachers—I aimed to create an environment of collaborative learning which, in its best moments, yielded welcome moments of collective "Eureka!" discoveries.

However, as soon as Maine Coast Waldorf School made the decision to continue spring classes remotely, I quickly realized that I would have to acquaint myself with a Zoom platform that I had never even heard of a week prior to the decision to go online. Zoom links, audio and video options, breakout rooms, chat functions, screen sharing tools, speaker and gallery views, were all as disorienting for a quasi-tech-illiterate as being suddenly transported to another country where all the signs in an unfamiliar language vexed befuddled visitors.

Furthermore, when I conducted my first class, I was struck by the almost laughable incongruity that I was teaching remotely the Medieval story of *Parzival*, a signature course unlike any other in the eleventh grade Waldorf curriculum. When I taught it in past years, the book required students to engage in an unparalleled level of personal reflection and collective grappling with crucial life questions: about parenting, advice-giving, dealing with failure, the role of suffering, what it takes to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, the power of transformation, the nature of *questions* themselves.

Previous generations of students reported that *Parzival* had provided them a window into their own "quests" (noting that every "question" contained a "quest"). They expressed appreciation for the almost intimate symbiosis stimulated by simultaneously burrowing into the book and delving into their own evolving values and beliefs.

Yet, as soon as I found myself confronted by a "Hollywood Squares" series of stacked little rectangles framing the faces of my students, I realized that many

of my hard-won strengths as a classroom teacher would be neutralized. No longer would I be able to rely upon the immediacy of those sometimes subtle, in-person cues to make mid-lesson shifts. No longer could I count on detecting a growing restlessness "in the air" during a class or an introverted student's subterranean query waiting to be prompted. I felt blindered, hamstrung, ineffectual.

Thankfully, during this initial foray into Zooming, the students themselves became the teachers, at least in terms of the technological adjustments I needed to learn. Most were remarkably patient as they instructed me how to assign them breakout rooms and how to use screen sharing for our mutual benefit. Unfortunately, they could not help me on the multiple occasions when the screen froze due to my "unstable internet connection." Nor could they rescue me from the unforgettable ignominy of finding myself locked out of a Zoom class entirely when I unintentionally left—not just a breakout room—but the entire meeting. It took me twenty frantic minutes of metaphorically pounding on the door to get back in before I discovered that I had inadvertently transferred my hosting duties to a student totally unaware of his new, exalted status.

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Technological glitches aside, I've identified a number of other reasons that made distance learning less than gratifying for teacher and students alike:

1. Because of the differing time delays with students' internet connections, I found that I could no longer conduct any group recitations without the entire exercise turning into a clamorous cacophony. Instead, I had to settle for individuals reciting parts solo in succession, an inadequate substitute for the unifying feeling that collective speaking can engender.

2. Some students reported feeling more "on the spot" when participating in virtual discussions. Said one, "Pressing the unmute button was daunting. Unlike an in-person class, I couldn't just jump right into the conversation. Speaking over Zoom felt as though it required preparation for every thought I shared. All eyes on my face—which was suddenly blown up in 'speaker view'—was a situation much more nerve-wracking than being in a regular class." The discomfort this student described was akin to watching television and feeling as if the television was watching back.

3. Another student pointed to other factors for the dampening effects of online learning on the free exchange of ideas. They remarked about their limited ability to communicate through facial expressions, verbal cues, and physical reactions. "I find my participation in class is often reliant on this type of responsive classroom space. . . (In our online class) the natural rapport was chopped up, and responding to others felt awkward."

4. "Zoom Fatigue" became an all-too-familiar condition, both for teacher and students. I found that I had to reduce the time of my classes, because of the exhaustion that participants felt. Gianpiero Petriglieri, a professor who specializes in studying this syndrome in the workplace, explains that during a video call, "People have to work harder to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice and body language; paying more attention to these consumes a lot of energy."[1] He adds that these feelings of exhaustion have been intensified by the conflating of what most of us take pains to maintain as separate dimensions of our lives: school/work, family, socializing with friends.

   > Imagine if you go to a bar, and in the same bar you talk with your professors, meet your parents or date someone. Isn't it weird? That's what we're doing now… We are confined in our own space, in the context of a very anxiety-provoking crisis, and our only space for interaction is a computer window.[2]

   Needless to say, such confusing convergences in our lives can contribute added stress and fatigue.

5. A specific adjustment related to decreasing class time was that I had to abbreviate "presentation" segments of my classes. In a typical, in-person lesson, I could spend 15-20 minutes introducing new material without feeling as if students' attentions were wandering. However, in this on-screen format, I realized how quickly my student could either tune out or find their way to other distractions. While I can't be certain which diversions beguiled them, one of my students later confessed how easy it was to "multi-task," i.e., appearing to engage in the class while simultaneously watching

1 Quoted in Manyu Jiang, "The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy," 4/22/20, bbc.com

2 Ibid.

> a dazzling TikTok dance routine or some graphic YouTube video of a feckless skateboarder smashing into a lamppost after unsuccessfully landing a glide down a handrail. Given the fragmented and digressive appeal of internet hyperlinks and endlessly entertaining social media sites, it's no wonder that students' attention spans are harder to hold in a humanities class that requires sustained focus, active listening, and nimble thinking.

There's another contributing factor that teachers using this online medium may need to acknowledge. One of my colleagues noted that for our entire lives, our brains have been trained to switch into a passive mode when viewing a screen. As brain specialist and neurosurgeon Adam Lipson contends, "There have been EEG studies that demonstrate that television watching converts the brain from beta wave activity to alpha waves, which are associated with a daydreaming state, and a reduced use of critical thinking skills."[3] If a similar reaction occurs when entranced by any digital display, is it any surprise that students' eyes would glaze over after a few minutes of a teacher's online lecture?

Of course, some of the benefits that distance learning provides deserve mention. As one student said, "We were in the comfort of our own homes, somewhere I am able to very effectively get my work done. . . I was always well-rested, alert and prepared, having done my work in the relaxed environment of my home." Another student extolled the virtue of at-home learning by explaining that not having to commute to and from school or participate in extra-curricular activities, she had more time to complete lengthy reading assignments.

Clearly, comfort and convenience offer significant dividends to online learners. Of course, so does accessibility—assuming sufficient internet availability—in those cases where distance or travel constraints or a once-in-a-century pandemic makes in-person instruction challenging, if not impossible. When the alternatives dwindle to either distance learning or no formal learning at all, most concerned parents and diligent students would opt for online classes.

However, what if the choice comes down to either online education or some muted, diminished form of in-school instruction? In a Herculean effort to reopen schools this fall, many administrators followed the guidelines established by health officials. They are severely reducing numbers of students in classrooms, implementing protocols for social distancing, and requiring faculty, students, and staff to wear masks. I have only begun to imagine what teaching such a class would be like. I have been longing for the buzz and hubbub of enthusiastic high school students interacting in a class again. I wonder, though, if those ubiquitous masks, almost entirely obscuring students' facial expressions and muffling some of their voices, would provide much of an improvement over their unmasked, two-dimensional likenesses viewed on a computer screen.

One final perspective about this topic needs some consideration. I have puzzled for many years over my ambivalence regarding too much dependence upon electronic devices for educational purposes. I considered it a major concession to the ascendency of the electronic age when, a number of years ago, I decided to show in class several video versions of Shakespeare's "Get thee to a nunnery" scene, from *Hamlet*, Act III, so that students could experience for themselves different directorial interpretations.

However, I have been loath to supplement most of my classes with material culled from the internet. No doubt this feeling is a holdover from my pre-computer, teacher training days at Emerson College, in England. I have always felt that direct, in-person, teacher-to-students interaction creates by far the most immediate and effective situations for meaningful learning. Virtual media has always seemed to me an intrusive intervention, a lazy fallback option to grab the attention of a generation of young people addicted to screens.

> [Technology is] also a relentless force insinuating itself into our lives, blurring the lines between the virtual and the real, the trivial and the meaningful, and the counterfeit and the truly human.

That said, I long ago realized that the digital revolution has overrun our culture, and that it would be fruitless to join the holdout Luddites wishing to transport us back to a simpler era. Indeed, in my personal life, I have become just as dependent as everyone else on the convenience of emailing and the entertainment value of Netflix. However, this major step into distance learning requires additional caution, especially considering Rudolf Steiner's repeated admonitions over a century ago that dark forces have been working since the advent of the Industrial Age to "mechanize" humanity. And while the technological

3 Quoted in Stephanie Vozza, "How Giving Up TV for a Month Changed My Brain and My Life," 6/06/16, fastcompany.com

advances of the past few decades now seem to offer us wondrous benefits, I am reminded of the fairy tale of "Rumpelstiltskin."

Like the miller's daughter, we are faced with a seemingly insurmountable task; hers was spinning straw into gold; ours is suffusing today's materialistic worldview with a spiritual perspective. In the daughter's case, three times the clever little man Rumpelstiltskin rescued her by offering to turn the straw into gold in return for her most treasured possessions: a necklace, a ring, and even her future first-born child. In our time, we have also been offered an endless "golden thread": the worldwide web that provides instantaneous global connectivity, boundless information, limitless diversions. However, as with the stickiest of webs, we have been ensnared by its enticements, without thinking about the price the future will exact. In the original Grimm tale, it is interesting that when the daughter-turned-queen resists giving up her first-born, offering instead all manner of riches to satisfy Rumpelstiltskin, he demurs, saying, "No, I would rather have a living creature than all the treasure in the world."[4]

I wonder if the current technological stranglehold on nearly every aspect of our lives will also demand a "living" sacrifice. Put another way: by eagerly and universally submitting to the allurements of digital devices, are we in danger of giving up some essential part of our humanity?

Thankfully, the fairy tale provides us with a possibly happy ending. Rumpelstiltskin gives the queen an out: ascertain his name, and she could keep her child. She needed a tireless and observant messenger to uncover the little man's identity. After the queen blurts out his name, Rumpelstiltskin throws the ultimate tantrum: "He stamped his right foot so deep into the earth that he sank down as far as his waist; then he seized his left foot with both hands in a rage, and tore himself right down the middle into two."[5]

The wisdom of fairy tales reassures us that as soon as we give the adversary a name, as soon as we pull the cloak of anonymity away, he loses his power. In our digital age, we need to awaken our powers of observation as well. We need to call the technology that has infiltrated all of our most human interactions—including education—what it is, not just what it purports to be. Call it a relative good perhaps, a comfort and convenience for many, a diversion for many more, but also a relentless force insinuating itself into our lives, blurring the lines between the virtual and the real, the trivial and the meaningful, and the counterfeit and the truly human.

David Sloan *taught at Green Meadow Waldorf School for 25 years before joining Maine Coast Waldorf School in 2006 as a founding high school teacher. He also helped to launch the Shining Mt. Waldorf High School in Boulder, Colorado. He is the author of* Stages of Imagination: Working Dramatically with Adolescents *and* Life Lessons: Reaching Teenagers through Literature*, as well as of a poetry collection entitled* The Irresistible In-Between*. David is a faculty member at the Center for Anthroposophy's high school teacher training summer program.*

4 "The Fairy Tale of Rumpelstiltskin," translated by Joyce Crick, 10/13/09, theguardian.com

5 "The Fairy Tale of Rumpelstiltskin".