

# Learning for Life – Learning from Life

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Schools are always faced with new challenges. It is part of the teacher's task to become aware of the spirit of the times and to learn to understand it. Awareness can start with the most simple of events, possibly with the following daily occurrence: young people enter the school and leave it again. This is an interesting area of observation. We may experience their coming in and going out as a deep breath which complements every school day. It is a movement without which school could not happen and it is a movement which continues internally, because breathing in and breathing out is an underlying concept of teaching. We welcome the pupils in the morning and we say goodbye to them at the end of the day. Every lesson lives between these two: the beginning and the end; and between them unfold a variety of learning processes. Here we already see a crucial feature of teaching: teaching is not only about the teaching of knowledge. "Correct" breathing hints towards another quality, a quality which has echoes in our daily teaching routines. Even if we do not consciously shape this breathing process, it is nonetheless influenced by the activities we do with the pupils. If we carefully observe how the pupils enter and leave the school, we might be

able to perceive whether breathing is nurtured at a particular school.

## **Learning for life / Learning from life**

The class teacher has a prominent role in Rudolf Steiner Schools. However, the eight-year class teacher cycle is being questioned today. People ask how one single person can possibly teach every subject competently and tend to think it an impossible task. Specialist subject teachers would do the job much better, wouldn't they? If we look at a teacher's knowledge of a school subject only, we would agree with the above, but there is more to teaching than just knowledge of a subject. What then is so special about class teachers? It is their ability to be the role model of an ever-changing and developing human being. It creates a strong inner image to try and respond to children's development from class 1 to class 8. I once observed how some class 9 pupils carefully watched their former class teacher; they wanted to see how she had changed in the five weeks between the end of the old and the beginning of the new school year and whether she would handle the transition successfully. Watching her first appearance on stage with the new class 1 children made her former pupils not only smile but also fostered a deep respect within them. It is the development of the human being which is particularly important and not only the teaching of facts and knowledge. This is not to say that competence in a subject area is not essential. Subject knowledge is indeed crucial. Therefore, many schools have arranged support for class teachers in particular subject areas, be it the teaching of a specific subject by another teacher or be it through collaboration with a colleague. Through what has been said above, we start to glimpse that life itself is a teacher. We need to learn to work with this more consciously.

*"The first social-educational area is one which is to serve our newly founded Waldorf*

*school: the area that includes classes for adolescents, the tuition and education by which people are to be prepared for what is required of them by a truly social thinking both now and for the foreseeable future ... The other area we can consider social and pedagogical is that of which I would say, it should impart the "theory of life." We are in a poor way, if we face life rigidly and as a stranger. We stand rightly in life only if every moment of every day and every week of every year is a source for us of learning, for our further development. We will have experienced our school best - no matter how far we have come in it - if we have learned through this school how to learn from life .... Life is a school for every healthy human being."*<sup>#</sup>

Therefore we do not leave real life at the doorstep of the classroom. We invite it in but it has to be in a shape appropriate to the children. By doing this, we make it possible for the pupils to face life in a more and more conscious way until, in the upper classes, reflecting upon experiences is practised with the students.

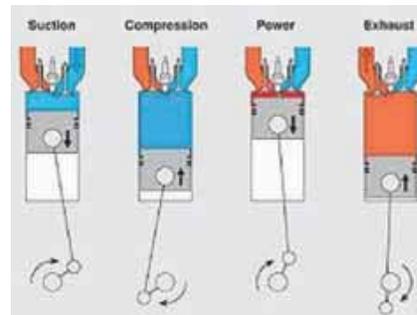
So, how does this look in practice? One of the topics in the lower school is "from grain to bread". The children are actively involved in the complete process throughout the cycle of the seasons, from the sowing of the grain to the baking of the bread. Thus the children really experience all the related activities in a holistic way. Later, in the upper classes, the students spend three weeks with people with learning difficulties, people who need help with managing routine tasks. The students start to ask themselves what it means to have learning difficulties. What kind of help is appropriate without causing offence? What is the connection between themselves and a person with learning difficulties? These challenging questions arise out of real encounters and are not abstract or theoretical. Out of this kind of interaction with real life emerges learning from life and learning for life. But who has prepared this lesson? For the time being, the answer remains in the dark but something does indeed happen and we are able to

look back on it. Looking back is a way of reflection which connects the experience to real life.

Indeed, school does not only happen inside the classroom. It is of uttermost importance that teaching, the core task of the school, connects theoretical knowledge with the world and with life. At Steiner schools we study plants not only in books but also in their natural surroundings on regular nature walks and later in botany camps. The same can be said for mathematical objects such as a parabola. We calculate and draw it but we do not forget its "earthly" sides: the parabola-mirror or water trajectories. Thus, some extension of the knowledge is made. Yet, even more important is now the question of the relevance between a parabola or a plant and the pupil. As teachers we prepare our lessons and connect to the subject content, a content which is meaningful, and which has a connection to the world and also a connection to ourselves. How does this connection live within us?

Let us take a four-stroke engine, a so-called Otto engine, as an example of this aspect.

I would like to take you now through a sequence of activities which I used to do with my students when I introduced



the four-stroke-engine. Please observe how your relationship to the engine changes as we go through the process together.

The function is as follows:

1. Intake stroke.
2. Compression stroke.
3. Combustion stroke.
4. Exhaust stroke.

I draw the rhythm and function on the board and the students can see the actual parts on the engine itself. Now I start up an open engine, then I bring the engine closer and the students'

<sup>#</sup> Steiner, R. (1998 [1919-20]). *Idee und Praxis der Waldorfschule* [The Idea and Practice of the Waldorf School] (GA 297, lecture 4, September 24, 1919). Dornach, Switzerland: Rudolf Steiner Verlag. [Not available in English].

understanding grows. With all these activities the question arises what this engine has to do with me as a human being. The students now have the knowledge but it stays on their outside. How can I bring a dynamic relationship between the knowledge and the students about?

Here is an attempt to make a new connection: The four phases can be shown acoustically.

Intake stroke: strong sound of breathing in.  
SHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Compression stroke: AHAHAHAHAHAH

Combustion stroke: Boom!

Exhaust stroke: Phooo!

Or in one breath: Sh – Ah – Boom – Phooo

Let's do this now to a strict rhythm: SH – AH, etc.

It quickly becomes clear that this is a rhythm which leaves us breathless. It does not correspond to our natural breathing rhythm. But we practise it and try to observe the effect on ourselves. The next step comes out of the fact that there is not only one cylinder in such an engine but usually four of them. So we divide the class in four groups and make a four-stroke engine canon.

An inner picture, almost like an inner gesture of the engine, emerges through this activity. Through engaging with this gesture we interact with the lesson content in such a way that its core can show itself. Furthermore, another component emerges: we have been uplifted. The students have been invigorated because they understand the content better and we are invigorated because we have made the effort to engage with an inner gesture. This is the realm of the life forces which on the one side enable learning and on the other side rejuvenate us. Real learning has an invigorating effect and gives us new strength. It is a celebration! Nevertheless, let us not forget that a celebration needs to be properly prepared. It needs planning and devotion to make it a success. However, everyone who has ever prepared a party knows how many unexpected things can happen. Not only knowledge is needed in such a situation but also the ability to accept whatever comes; indeed to be able to see the unexpected as a challenge rather than as a setback.

## Vaulting

Not long ago I watched some gymnasts doing vaults. They did the wildest kinds of jumps: direct vaults, handsprings, summersaults and such. I was impressed by the sequences of vaults from start to finish. First, the athletes concentrated. They visualised their vault; they imagined every phase precisely until they felt ready to go. Then they started. But on the way they had to let go of their inner images. While running towards the vaulting table, they had to release their images and build up a complete presence, only this presence was relevant at the point of take off and while they were in the air. Finally, there was the moment of landing, preferably on the feet.

Unfortunately, the competitors could not stop at the landing point and thus missed a beautiful opportunity. An athlete who is able to remain at the landing point for an instant can sometimes experience a kind of repercussion. This may lead to profound encounters.

The sequence of events as described above serves as an image of education: preparation, teaching and reflection. We prepare our lessons. We know what we want to do; we have internalised the lesson's content. We then enter the class. Now we have to let go and allow a presence of mind to take room in the encounters with the students. How are they today? What lives in them today? If we see teaching as an art, we also have to understand that learning happens in the void between teacher and pupil. This void is an indefinite and mysterious space; it only comes into being in the encounter between student and teacher, therefore we need to reflect on it afterwards and ask ourselves what has happened.

What about the preparation of the encounter then; how does it relate to teaching? Are there any indications within the lesson planning which show whether the lesson will succeed or not? Do we ourselves make an inward leap? Rudolf Steiner starts his account with an important hint:

*This evening I wish to make some preliminary remarks, and I would like to give you a kind of introduction today.*<sup>1</sup>

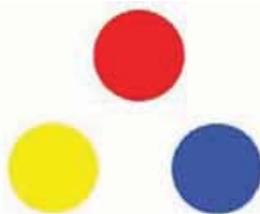
<sup>1</sup> Steiner, R. (1996 [1919]). *The foundations of human experience* (GA 293, opening address, August 20, 1919). Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

*We can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task.<sup>2</sup>*

Please imagine that I have a yellow chalk in one hand and a blue one in the other.



What can I create out of the tension between yellow and blue? One possibility would be to mix the colours and make green. This would be something new: green. Green is neither blue nor yellow. If I look at this action I would describe it as a matter of intellect or feeling. It corresponds to something which is very common today. I have often seen students' essays which have been constructed from various fragments of texts found on internet. This manner of working is not just confined to pupils. Teachers also know it well. We take a section from this course book and a fragment from another book, combine them and so arrive at a new lesson. A real challenge, however, would be the following question: in one hand I have a yellow chalk, in the other hand a blue one but how do I get from these two colours to the colour red?



An answer can only be found if we dare to jump.

In his writing and lectures, Steiner challenges us again and again to make these kinds of jumps. We cannot do justice to his thinking if we do not leap.

### **Education is Self-Education**

Let us take a next step and look at the jump from another side.

*Basically, there is no education other than self-education, whatever the level may be. ... Every education is self-education, and as teachers we can only provide the environment of the child's own self-education. We have to provide the most favourable conditions in which, through our agency, the child can educate itself in accordance with its own destiny.<sup>3</sup>*

We are not only teachers on the basis of our own education, not only on the basis of being employed by a school; we are teachers chiefly on the grounds that we are in a constant process of development, in a process of self-education. To focus on the process of self-education is of utmost importance in our demanding profession.

We know from classroom practice that we need to support and develop the aspect of light in our pupils. In it lies the strength to be in command of the shadow side. The most dignified task of education is to strengthen our own light and let it shine, to encourage the children and trust them. Trusting the individual to find within themselves the power to mature shows that in every one of us lives the seed of the future. We have seen in today's lecture that we can say yes to life by learning from life. Now we can start to look at a further task: the ability to meet the future. This will have to become real in daily life. Let me give you an example.

I knew a class nine pupil who was an excellent gymnast. In fact, at everything he was better than the teacher. Understandably, some tension arose between him and the teacher. When the teacher wanted to introduce summersaults to the class, the student demanded that the teacher should demonstrate it first. This was the last straw. The teacher took the case to the conference to be debated. At first, punishments were being discussed but then the teachers concentrated on the question of what the student should actually learn and a new idea emerged. The student was asked to become the PE teacher's assistant for two weeks. The parents gave permission for their son to be freed from the regular timetable. Within a couple of days the student and the PE teacher became a good team. The student realised that his clever showing off had been frustrating for his peers and had not been helpful in creating a positive learning environment.

It was encouraging to see his progress now. He understood how much imagination it takes to repeatedly respond to situations. The successful

2 Steiner, R. (1996 [1919]). *The foundations of human experience* (GA 293, lecture 1, August 21, 1919). Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

3 Steiner, R. (1988 [1923]). *The child's changing consciousness and Waldorf education* (GA 306, lecture 6, April 20, 1923). Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

working towards the future as it had happened in this case, helped to foster new confidence in the student. It was the vision of the future which had been helpful rather than looking into the past. In a radical way we can say that the question “who am I?” needs to be answered more and more with the help of a future vision, with a vision towards what wants to come into being. Healthy confidence is no longer fostered by the past. This becomes clear when we look at people’s careers today. In the past, people chose their profession according to the family’s traditions. This is no longer the case. Young people in our day and age have to find their own way, out of their own strength. The crucial task for the developing adolescent is to accept themselves and to become able to face the future. As teachers we ought to provide a helpful environment for these processes.

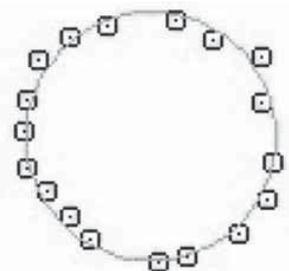
### Self-Governance

Steiner’s pedagogical impulse is not restricted to the classroom, it consists of much more. For adolescents to become emancipated out of their own free will requires an environment which puts this ideal into practice. We are called to do our work in this spirit. Out of this emerges one of the most pressing questions of our time: how do free individuals work together?

Steiner created an exceptional moment at the beginning of his teaching course in 1919 when he talked about a new dimension of cooperation. He initiated a progressive form of communication, a new kind of listening and speaking. Every single one of us is called to become a creative, productive individual in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance. How is this to be understood? One remarkable example lives in a school I visited recently where each teacher is encouraged to pursue their own research project and is given the necessary support to do so. Thus, a number of studies emerged within a short time and started to enliven the teaching practice at this particular school. A college of researchers grew. What one colleague could give to another was mutually appreciated. The teachers’ own productivity was encouraged by the receptiveness of the others; in other words: initiative was encouraged. The spiritual world was taken into account in this kind

of research. It creates an atmosphere with room for potential and this in turn can have an inspiring effect on the management structures. Day-to-day cooperation can become a vessel for impulses from the spiritual world and it is this collaboration which determines the management structures. In other words, a circle is not a series of individual points.

For a circle to be a circle, the void must be filled. What one human being can give to another, what they want to give each other, this is what fills the void and thus creates a completely fulfilled circle.



Today, we have drawn an arc across teaching, hopefully a colourful one. Now we have to step into it.

From the topic of learning for life and learning from life, past the gestures of an engine and finally to the possibilities of cooperation, everywhere we have found the same theme: it needs to be put into practice.

A rich field of opportunities for practise opens up, it is not only more work and pressure. It is an activity which enlivens us and lightens the load; it refreshes us and leads us into the core of the issues. ♦



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