

### Endnotes

- 1 Rudolf Steiner, *Human values in education*, GA 310, Lecture 3.
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_, *Study of man*, GA 293, Lecture 1.
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_, *The spiritual guidance of the individual and humanity*, GA 15, Lecture 1.
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_, "Education and the moral life," in the *Goetheanum weekly*, 1923.
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_, *Human values in education*, GA 310, Lecture 6.
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_, *Study of man*, GA 293, Lecture 9.

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## The Lower Grades and High School Years

*James Pewtherer*

Despite their Waldorf training, many teachers working in Waldorf classrooms may be unconsciously guided by what they met as children in their own education. Having resolved to better their own school experiences, they have decided to teach young human beings out of greater insight into the way the child learns.

Yet breaking the patterns of what were most likely over-intellectualized practices in their own education requires ongoing consciousness of the deeper educational principles which guide the Waldorf teacher. It also asks the teachers to think in a new way about what stands behind the topic they are presenting. This can be thought of as the artistic approach, in part because it does not involve a straight line from the immediate goal (e.g., learning to read) to a deeper one (e.g., the role of reading in opening countless worlds). In addition, an artist is able to see and present things which often do not occur to the casual observer.

As many of us can attest, the feelings of engagement and even enthusiasm when we encounter an artistic presentation are also

present in good teaching. Such presentations awaken us to new facets of what might otherwise seem ordinary and uninteresting. If you teach astronomy, for instance, you want to take your students outside to observe the sky. Many of them will be awestruck by the vastness and beauty of the dome of the heavens on a clear, dark night. But if you want them to see and identify not only the constellations, but the apparent permanence of the fixed stars, you must prepare them to "see" before they are swept up in the immediate experience. Then you can speak of how the Ancient Greeks, like all human beings from time immemorial, saw a reflection of the human condition in the sky, and how they learned about themselves from these cosmic

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images. So it was that many millennia ago, the inhabitants of Greece identified the constellation Cassiopeia as the throne of the vain queen who bragged that she was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. She was punished by being cast into the sky where she

perpetually wheels around the North Star.

This story not only helps students to remember this constellation, but can also lead to a conversation in the class about how a preoccupation with superficial qualities weakens one's focus on the things in life which matter. Of course, one can find other qualities on which to

focus within the scope of teaching astronomy. That is what makes the work of the individual Waldorf teacher so central to this education.

Work in the high school asks more of the students in terms of bringing conscious observation to what they do. But here, we resist the temptation to explain the theory and instead lead the students to discover what the all-embracing concept might be. Now, after first setting the context in which the object of study is placed, the students experience an activity which stimulates them to add first-hand experience to the preliminary understanding with which they began. The high school students are increasingly encouraged to examine a subject by bringing their own thinking to bear. Here, the feelings engendered by this kind of “primary research” activity enrich both the given and the emerging concepts. In this way, the students can begin to add their own experiences to the intellectual construct they have been offered.

Thus, a ninth grade class in History through Drama might read and act out scenes from plays from many cultures and ages. Taking on parts and becoming those stage characters; and looking at, building, or experiencing the costumes, properties, and scenery—all this gives the students a chance to feel for themselves something of the people of that time and place. From there, the students can begin to explore the consciousness and the contemporary world in which the people of that time lived.

Another key methodology entails the principle of moving from the whole to the parts. Rudolf Steiner gave curricular and methodological indications aimed at countering the atomization of modern thought into ever-smaller bits of information. Such a collection of various facts, he indicated, would tell the human being less and less about our true nature. He urged teachers to recognize that the world and the human being

have a wholeness to them which cannot be seen merely as the sum of their parts. No matter how much we analyze brain function to understand why a human being acts in a particular way, the human being cannot be understood without taking the whole of our being into account. This includes not only the physical organs and forms of the human being, but those aspects whose workings are not to be seen. This is not merely a matter of psychology, but the posited reality of a spiritual side to the human being as well.

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In teaching history or literature, then, Steiner asked the teachers to reckon with what came before in someone’s biography or story as well as what came after (or is still in the process of becoming for people who are alive now). The whole span of a lifetime was to be considered, not just the notable moments.

Likewise, he asked them to take in all the factors in a phenomenon, whether in physics or the introduction of number.

So, for instance, in teaching geometry in the elementary school, a teacher may begin by having the children stand and slowly turn in place so that the view constantly changes as they rotate through a full 360 degrees. They may then be asked to walk a straight line, followed by the forms of regular polygons such as triangles and pentagons. Based on this experience the teacher may then ask how we measure the distance of a given line or at what angle do we go forward from our starting point before we turn. All of this leads to the construction of many geometrical forms, first in two dimensions on paper, later in three-dimensional solids, and in the high school in the study of projective geometry in which lines disappear and reappear through infinity.

Even the introduction of number in the first grade leads the child to experience the truth that the parts come from the whole. The young child can perceive how all numbers begin with one and that everything proceeds from there. From one

stick, we can get two sticks if we break off a piece, then three pieces, and so on. In this way, one is the biggest number, it is the “whole,” while the other numbers are really “parts” or “subsections” of this “whole.” This concept can grow with the child and contribute to a sense that the human being, too, is an indivisible whole whose many parts (body, soul, and spirit; thinking, feeling, and willing; brain, heart, and lungs, etc.) are all subsets of this whole.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the methodology to understand in the Waldorf approach to education is the importance of rhythm and repetition in learning. This notion is foundational to the way in which children are taught. The teacher resists the temptation to give the children too much information or too much of an experience in a given lesson or on a given day. He or she asks, “What is the most important point I want the children to take away from the lesson?” rather than focusing on the presentation of many facts.

Teachers know that the child’s ability to retain, understand, and enjoy a meaningful learning experience requires time to digest what has been encountered. This means that the teacher allows the children to sleep on what was taught and then revisits it by having the children draw it out of themselves by retelling what they heard and experienced. In taking an experience through sleep, they achieve a distance from it. This then gives them a chance to re-create—now partly out of themselves—what was previously presented. They work with these new concepts, coming to learn them ever more deeply out of repeated recreations. Repetition serves to solidify what they have helped to re-create.

This approach to teaching and learning has its own lawful rhythm: presenting something new on day one and then recalling and applying the material by repeating it on day two. There is then a kind of breathing which takes place, always putting the child’s learning into the middle of the process:

- The teacher presents.
- The child recapitulates and re-creates the next day.
- The teacher and the child work with the material in a further repetition so that the child’s will is engaged in an outwardly visible way.

The principles of Waldorf methodology are integral to its efficacy. But it bears repeating that the individual teacher needs to take up these methods and apply them out of his or her own genius.

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