

Crafts and Technology: More and Sooner?

It is well known that Rudolf Steiner put a great deal of emphasis on craft and technology in education. But the circumstances of his time made it difficult to go as far in this direction as he seems to have wanted to go. This briefing gathers together some food for thought about the extent to which Waldorf Education has succeeded in achieving its purpose

The dominant trend in Western education is the cultivation of the intellect. Support for emotional development and practical skills has been a very subsidiary concern.

Recent years have seen some moves towards a more balanced approach as demonstrated by the much greater emphasis on the arts in primary schools, the rise of the craft, design and technology (CDT) movement and the recent moves to establish City Technology Colleges.

It is not easy to buck the general trend, however, and even the first Waldorf school was not able to avoid some unwished-for compromises.

The 'need to change course'

Shortly before his death in 1925, Rudolf Steiner said that the Waldorf School must change course. He was no longer able to explain exactly what he meant by this but it seems certain that he was referring to a reorientation of the school towards greater emphasis on artistic and practical education. He may also have been concerned about the extent which the school was no longer the 'comprehensive' school he had attempted to establish - a school aimed at healing social divisions both through the width of its intake and the comprehensiveness of its curriculum.

A historic compromise

What is certain is that compromises had to be made because of the situation in which the school was established - compromises which Steiner referred to on many occasions. It is clear from many remarks that his wish for a radical shift in educational practice had to be tempered by realistic assessment of what would be allowed by the authorities. Take the 'Case of the Missing Cobbler':

I should dearly like to have had a shoemaker as a teacher in the Waldorf school if this had been possible. It could not be done because such a thing does not fit into a curriculum based on present-day

requirements, but in order that the children might really learn to make shoes, and know, not theoretically, but through their own work what this entails. I should dearly liked from the very beginning to have had a shoemaker on the staff of the school. But it simply could not be done because one would have run into trouble with the authorities... Nevertheless we do try to make children into practical workers. [Torquay, Lect 7]

Would the cobbler have been the sole craftsman on the staff if the authorities had been more benign? Presumably not.

But it was not just a question of having to do without the full range of educational workers. It was also having to accept a curriculum balance that was not ideal.

And so, since our aims are not founded on fanaticism but always on objective reality, something bad had to be done right from the start, namely a kind of compromise had to be made. [15/21 April 1923]

The compromise was that pupils should have reached the 'academic' standards reached in conventional school at the 9th and 12th years and at school leaving age.

This must be for the teacher - I have to use this tautology - a 'leaning-over-backwards-compromise' It is inevitable. A realistic person has to act like this, for discretion is essential. A fanatic would act differently. Many difficulties will of course result from such a compromise and many teachers would find it much easier to steer a straight course towards their aims.

And it is clear from other remarks that the curriculum established as a result of this compromise was more intellectual and less practical than was desirable. Speaking in that citadel of intellectualism, Oxford, and holding up examples of children's practical work, Steiner observed:

This is the sort of thing we produce. This is about the standard reached by Class 6. Many of these things belong properly to junior classes, but, as I have said, we have to make compromises and shall only be able to reach our ideal later on - and, then what a child of 11 or 12 now does, a child of 9 will be able to do. The characteristic of this practical

work is that it is both spontaneous and artistic. The child works with a will on something of his own choosing, not at a set task. This leads on to handwork or woodwork classes in which the child has to carve and make all kind of objects of his own planning.

Steiner continued to speak about carving, especially carving moveable toys, and then he made the following statement:

The children do this between the 11th and 15th years and nowadays even later, but gradually we shall have to bring it down into the younger classes, where the forms have to be simple.

And as Karl Stockmeyer remarks, in his book on the Curriculum, 'It is interesting to see that tasks which are set in class 6 and later are supposed to be given to younger classes. Such statements should be thought about again and again' (p 218).

The effect of the Weimar recession

It is easy to forget, another vital factor inhibiting the full implementation of the practical curriculum. This was the extremely difficult financial situation with which the Waldorf school had to contend. The reckless printing of paper money during the early years of the Weimar republic led to wild inflation. People had to resort to pushing round barrowloads of money for major purchases.

The lack of funds must have put severe restrictions on the extent to which craft teaching could be developed. Workshops are much more expensive than blackboards, and the raw materials and tools needed must have been a major obstacle to progress, quite apart from the attitude of the 'authorities'.

Hence, no doubt, the emphasis on handwork - knitting and sewing - which require relatively modest resources. Cooking - an equally plausible practical activity for small children - requires a much greater investment in equipment and space, as do many other desirable activities.

The workers children

Yet another factor may have been the early age at which the working class children for whom the school was established had to leave school. Robbed of access to their adolescent years, it was unavoidable that these children had to be equipped with the rudiments of academic education at an earlier age than might otherwise have been advisable. Moreover, the fact that they would mostly be obliged to earn their living in manual occupations meant that some bias to the cultural had to be accepted.

It is striking too, how much is packed into the curriculum for the 8th class. It is difficult to believe, that such an overload would have been adopted if the children were

not about to depart at just that time when they could begin to grapple with concepts and ideas.

The changed circumstances

It would be wrong to pretend that none of the pressure that applied in the early 1920s exist today. Shortage of money is a familiar enough problem. And more than a few of the parents of children at Waldorf schools might be alarmed if we postponed writing and reading until 9 or 10.

Nevertheless circumstances have changed a great deal and it is difficult to avoid the impression that it is less external pressures and more the powerful influence of tradition that keeps Waldorf schools from seizing the chance to approach more nearly the ideal they attempt to embody.

There have of course been attempts in this direction - notably the Hibernia school near Hamburg. But even that school, so far as one can tell, has little changed the practice of introducing craftwork relatively late, and its range of craft activity appears to remain fairly close to the original model.

The case for 'sooner'

It is clear from the passage quoted above that Steiner wanted the crafts to be begun earlier than proved possible in the original Waldorf school. And I think that a case could be made out that more than a few of those tackled in the 'upper school' do not rightly belong there at all. Weaving for example is something that youngsters can easily manage, so is box-making and basket-work. One wonders whether it wasn't simply that such things couldn't be done at the earlier age because of the 'authorities' so they got postponed to the later period. Looking at the overall movement of the curriculum, it is clear that there is an alignment of the curriculum with the cultural evolution of humankind. The first three years correspond with that 'Fall' from the paradisaical state before the advent of agriculture leading 'down' to the study of farming and building that mark the beginning of the post-Atlantean age. And certainly by the age of 9 Steiner hoped for a major burst of practical activity.

Do not omit, even at the beginning, when showing the child the connection between agriculture and human life to give him a clear idea of the plough, of the harrow etc., in connection with his geographical idea. And try especially to make the child familiar with the shapes of some of these implements even if only in the form of a little plaything or piece of handwork. It will give him skill and will fit him for taking his place properly in life later on. And if you could even make little ploughs and let the children cultivate the school garden, if they could be allowed to cut with little sickles, or mow with little scythes, this would establish a good contact with life. Far more important than skill is the psychic intimacy of the child's life with the life of the world. For the actual fact is: a child who has cut grass with a sickle, mown grass with a scythe, drawn a furrow with a

little plough will be a different person from a child who has not done these things. The soul undergoes a change from doing things. Abstract teaching of manual skill is really no substitute. [Practical Advice to Teachers, Lect 11]

Should we assume, as Stockmeyer does, that this is the first task of handicrafts which most likely has not yet 'been put into practice by any Steiner school'? People did all sew and cook and whittle before the great Flood and the move to agriculture and settled dwellings.

In stories and legends we trace the great cultural ages through classes 4 to 6. How incomparably richer if the technical advance being made at these times were absorbed in practical form. We have in fact the framework of a practical curriculum - we just don't implement it. In classes 7-9 we trace the development of the modern times. And we have good authority for the importance of the history of technology.

It is much more important for the child to learn how the steam engine or the mechanical loom transformed the world than that they should learn about such incidents as the altering of the Emser telegram. Much of what is still found in our history books is of value for the education of the child and even Charlamagne and similar historical figures should be treated without too much detail.

Should we not also be teaching the practical skills that fit with such developments. Printing for example in Class 7; Electrical engineering in class 8; and so on? When we come to Classes 10 to 12, with their powerful emphasis on beauty and the aesthetic, it should be, I admit that we move on from techniques to issues of design and creative work. And to techniques that genuinely require advanced dexterity such as the potter's wheel.

A case for 'more'

Obviously craftwork and technology make up only one aspect of the distinctive practice making up Waldorf education. But do we perhaps underestimate how crucial this aspect is?

From what you have heard so far you may have gained the impression that the art of education is based on anthropo-sophical knowledge of man seeks to nurture above all a healthy and harmonious development of the child's physical body... And this is indeed the case. We do aim, in full consciousness to aid and foster the health and development of the child's physical body, for in this way the child's soul and spiritual nature is given the best means of unfolding freely and out of its own resources. By damaging as little as possible the spiritual forces working through the child, we give it the best possibility of developing healthily...

You may ask: From which educational ideal does such an attitude spring? It is the outcome of a total dedication towards human freedom. It springs from the ideal to place the human being into the world in

such a way that he can unfold his individual freedom or, at least, that no that no physical hindrances should prevent him from doing so. What we are specially striving for in our education with its emphasis on the promotion of the physical development of the child, is that our pupils should learn to make full use of their physical powers and skill in their later lives.

And while without question the arts have a vital role to play in this, the arts alone are not enough. For alongside the development of the rhythmic capacities, the manual skills of the earliest years must continue their development. It is, Steiner says, the precondition of freedom or in the anthroposophical terms, the raw material of Intuition.

A visitor to a handwork lesson in the Waldorf School might well feel perplexed at seeing both boys and girls sitting together, knitting and crocheting. In our school such activities can no longer be referred to as 'women's work' for both sexes are engaged in it. Results confirm that unless they are artificially discouraged, boys enjoy such work at much as girls do. But what should be the reasons for our insisting on such an unusual arrangement? A person who uses his fingers clumsily also suffers from a 'clumsy' intellect. That is, he is unable to be mobile in his thoughts and ideas, whereas someone with a skilful hand is better able to penetrate the essence of things with his thinking. Anyone who is aware of this open secret will appreciate that it is better to train the intellect indirectly by first developing outer skills and faculties. These, in turn, will stimulate the powers of intellect to ripen in a balanced way. (Renewal of Education p 67)

In any case it is not a question of either/or. The whole endeavour is aimed at integrating the different faculties. I cannot recall ever seeing it put into practice but Steiner's words on the integration of arts and craftwork are salutary.

Try for instance to link what has been done in music and singing lessons to handicraft lessons. Such an approach has an extraordinarily beneficial effect on children. All manual work was originally based on musical rhythm. Today this is hardly noticeable any longer. However, if you went into the country and listened to people thrashing, you would realise how the flail was handled rhythmically. I think we could recapture such a way of working. What I really mean is we must bring spirit back into our activities. [Konferenzen: 23.&20]

'The Waldorf school must change course'

By 1925 Steiner was worried that the Waldorf school movement was drifting away from its real destiny: the cultivation of the soil for the consciousness soul. Nobody who visited a range of Waldorf schools would feel anything but admiration for their many fine

achievements. But it has to be said that so far, the seeds of that change of direction Steiner hoped for seem to have fallen mainly on stony ground.

Technology as Spiritual Activity

For while the arts and religion can nourish and give us the strength for our day-to-day struggles, the real challenge of the present age lies in the spiritualisation of practical life. We have to learn to distinguish between 'me-first' character of the Western market economy and the cultural basis it colonises.

Technical culture has indeed one quite definite quality; this culture in its nature is through and through *altruistic*... In contrast to this there has developed what has its origin in capitalism, which must not necessarily be linked to technical culture or remain so linked.. Thus in recent times two streams meet in diametrical opposition to one another: modern technical life which calls upon people to be free from egoism, and coming from the past, private capitalism which can prosper only by the assertion of egoistic impulse... The only way to extricate ourselves is to have a life of spirit which has the courage to break away from old traditions. (A Social basis for Primary and Secondary Education, Stuttgart 11 May 1919)

And we shouldn't imagine that such a way of life of spirit is in some way antithetical to technical activity. Technology, Steiner asserts, is spiritual activity:

Naturally there exists today many a prejudice against the idea of introducing young people to practical life in the way indicated. But I speak about it here an entirely practical point of view. For it is true to say that of all the past ages in humanity's development, our present materialistic age is, in its own way, the most spiritual one. Perhaps I can explain myself better by telling you something about some theosophists whom I once met and who were striving towards a truly spiritual way of living. And yet in actual fact, they were real materialists...

"On the other hand, I like to tell those who are willing to listen to me, that I prefer a person holding a materialistic conception of the world but who, nevertheless is capable of the spiritual activity of thinking, to a theosophist who, through striving towards the spiritual world, falls back on materialistic images. A materialist is in error, but what he thinks does contain spirit, real spirit. The most spiritual activity in our time can be found in technological endeavour. There everything proceeds out of the spirit, out of the human spirit.

"It does not require great spiritual accomplishment to put a vase of beautiful flowers on a table, for nature has provided them. But to construct even a most simple machine does indeed require spiritual activity...

"I can assure you that once the art of education, based on anthroposophical insight, has gained a firm

foothold it will put into the world people who are far more practical than those who have gone through our more materialistically inclined forms of education. Waldorf Education will be imbued with creative spirit, and not with dreamed-up kind which tempts people to close their eyes to outer reality. To find the spirit without losing the firm ground under one's feet this is what I should like to call true anthroposophical endeavour.

"A teacher who wishes to introduce adolescents to the practical side of life could easily despair over the lack of manual skill, symptomatic of our times. One really has to ask oneself: Is there the possibility at all of turning children between their second dentition and puberty into more practical and skilful people?' [Soul Economy and Waldorf Education. pp 246-8)

Who, then, was Steiner bent upon educating? Not flower-arrangers, it seems, but the practical, altruistic, environmentally-conscious technologists we shall badly need in the 21st century.

Note: This Brighton Briefing was sent to The Hiram Trust in 1995 - the author is unknown.

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