

Distance learning from the perspective of Waldorf learning theory

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Given the current lockdown and the enforced need for distance learning at home, it is worth thinking about what the principles of learning are from a Waldorf perspective. In the past few years I have sought to articulate a learning theory for Waldorf education (Rawson, 2018, 2019, 2020), something that only a few others have attempted, notably Jost Schieren (2012 a & b)) and Peter Loebell (2000, 2017). This work has enabled me to formulate some very provisional ideas for learning online at home. I have been teaching in the upper school for the past two weeks online but I am in close contact with the others teaching all ages and I have had the opportunity to gather the experiences of Waldorf colleagues in China who have been doing this for 6 weeks already, at time of writing. Since I was conducting an online course with teachers over the past two weeks we have been able to gather experiences from all over China.

The reader is advised to check out some of the longer explanations of learning that I have uploaded onto the website www.learningcommunitypartners.eu. Here is a very brief summary of the main aspects of learning. Each theme is followed by a short discussion of the implications for online teaching and learning and homeschooling I do not attempt to justify or offer arguments for the outline presented here- these are provided in the literature just referred to.

Firstly let me start with a definition of learning that is relevant across childhood and youth. Learning is a process of individuation in which the spiritual core of the human being, the I, engages with the lived-in body (physical body and its life processes) and strives to establish relationships to self, others and the world. This process is called *Selbstbildung* in German, self-formation in engaging with nature, the lifeworld and the social and cultural structures the person is embedded in and striving to construct stable identities and maintain agency – the ability to act autonomously within the given setting a person is in. We call this transformative learning and it involves the whole human being.

From the perspective of anthroposophical anthropology the forces that form, shape and organize the bodily processes in the first phase of life up to the change of teeth are partially released from the body and become available to form and individualize the inner life of thinking, feeling and willing- a process that we call learning. In learning the soul takes up the experiences the person has through her senses and her emotional response to these and embodies these as memory. Over the course of time, the spirit- the I – harvests the fruits of these embodied experiences, extracting from them the forces necessary to generate and enrich dispositions and abilities. The human spirit- the I – grows through these assimilated experiences in the form of long-term abilities. Once I have an ability, once I am capable, I am a changed person, which is why we talk about transformative learning. This does not only lead to an increase in knowledge or abilities but fundamentally changes who we are. We become more experienced and capable of understanding ever greater complexity. However, it is clear that not all learning is transformative in this sense, especially if it is one-sided, either overly physical, intellectual or emotional.

Children and young people learn all the time informally and incidentally, however, through formal, structured instruction and through carefully established learning rhythms the learning become systematic. When people learn because they are interested and intrinsically motivated, their learning expands and their ability to learn increases significantly. We call this expansive learning and it is driven by the person's sense that learning is biographically relevant to them. When they only learn because of external expectations and pressures, or because they have to, they generally only do just enough to get by. This is called defensive learning. Two other concepts are useful to understand; surface learning involves short memory of facts, vocabulary, words, whereas deep learning means these experiences are connected to a meaningful context and are part of a more long-term growth of understanding. Deep learning develops through applying and linking what has been learned to a wider context. Living concepts are those that grow over a lifetime through new experiences. Each profound new experience influences what subsequent experiences the learner will have, by opening up the person to ever wider understandings and meanings.

From a Waldorf perspective, there are a number factors that influence learning. These include being;

- relaxed and feeling safe,
- feeling wanted and welcome in the learning situation,
- embedded in and being able to participate in a learning community,
- feeling supported and having the tools needed to learn,
- feeling that the tasks are comprehensible,
- feeling that it makes sense to the learner to make the effort to participate,
- feeling attuned to the situation and awake in the relevant senses.

In school the main lessons and other lessons invest considerable time enabling these conditions on a daily basis (sometimes referred to as the rhythmical part of the lesson).

Implications for online- teaching, remote learning

1. Good channels of communication between teachers and pupils, teachers and parents, pupils and pupils and a collective sense of being in this all together. Ensuring that all have good access. Because families are differently resourced, some children will be socially, economically, academically privileged, whilst others are disadvantaged.
2. Children should perform a short routine of coordination exercises, stretching, skipping, activating their bodily senses and balance, practice times tables, recitation of a poem and even singing, even if they are on their own. The rest of the learning process can be frequently interrupted by some physical exercises (running up and down stairs, skipping, hopping, clapping etc.)
3. Even if we can't meet, there should be at least daily contact with the teacher and class using whatever media are available.
4. Clear instructions and support for those who are uncertain.
5. Encourage pupils to stay in touch with each other and help each other.

From the teacher's perspective the primary preconditions are encapsulated in Steiner's notion of soul economy. Healthy learning occurs when the maximum amount of material is introduced in the minimum time using the simplest means...**but** in such a way that no child or student loses her overview of the situation. Healthy learning means minimizing the unhealthy

aspects and maximizing the sense of well-being. If learners generally have sense of coherence, that is, they have the feeling that they understand what is being asked of them, that they feel they can manage the tasks they are given and have the tools and resources they need, and they have the feeling it is meaningful.

Implications for online learning

- Provide enough material, keeping it technically simple, clear tasks and frequent repetition of the aims and ways of working. Get the pupils to signal that they have understood and working well (a smiley is sufficient).
- Give them clear guidelines about how long they should work. Set clear limits- not more than the time available in a normal lesson, probably less. So children (and parents) don't get anxious that they doing things right and doing enough.
- Encourage children to stop when they get tired and do other things.
- They need far more reassurance than they usually do in class, because of the lack of contact.

The main factors that influence the quality of 'soul economy' are:

- The quality of learning depends on the depth of the teacher's preparation- the teacher must know in advance what the pupils should learn, what the essential points are, what aspects are central and thus provide input that makes this obvious to the pupils (and what things to leave out because they can't be learned this way).
- The teacher must have a strong inner connection both to the subject matter and to the pupils and this manifests in enthusiastic interest.
- The material and the learning process should be presented in as artistic a way as possible, that shows that the parts belong together in a meaningful whole and the material is aesthetically of high quality.
- The material should be tailored to the specific learning needs and interests of the specific learning group.
- The task should offer a wide range of possibilities for individuals to engage with at different levels of interest and ability.
- Regular individualized concrete feedback and assessment for learning is very important (which also assumes that the pupils know what is expected).

The implications of this for online teaching, distance learning are:

- Carefully choose or create material to meet the needs and limitations of the situation (get help with digital presentation and design)
- Coordinate with other teachers so the pupils neither get too much nor too little material.
- Make sure the tasks are differentiated and ideally can be done without the help of the parents (some parents have more time and skills than others- don't be reliant on parents becoming teachers).

Learning then goes through the following stages, which have implications for online learning.

Learning activity	Usual implications	Implications for online/distance learning
Rich experience/ Participation in learning community	Direct experience through doing or through narrative, evoking strong imagination. Learner is embedded in a learning culture that focusses anticipation and sense of wonder in the class community. The teacher does not declare her intentions but bears them strongly in consciousness.	Generally we should avoid, where possible, trying to introduce new material and learning, it's better to concentrate on practicing existing skills and knowledge. However, if we introduce new experiences, then they should be either through observation, reading interesting material, good images or watching appropriate film (TV documentaries usually explain the concepts and tell the audience what to think). Opportunities for participation (especially in language learning, music, Eurythmy) are very limited. In some cases it is perhaps better to simply drop the subject and activity for the duration. Younger pupils may need a shared timetable of activities (e.g. all start at the same time with a verse each speaks at home). Even older classes need at least once a week regular shared contact.
forgetting	Overnight the experiences are sorted and related in the unconscious to other experiences. This process can be enhanced through the teacher's consciousness of the whole phenomenon during the preparation and implicit in the initial experience.	This remains a vital part of the learning rhythm and needs to be part of the learning routine even when this is remote. Perhaps the teacher needs to have stronger and clearer thoughts in her preparation than usual to direct the children's unconscious relating.
Recall, sharing, making-meaning	Individual recall of subjective experiences, enriched in the unconscious, and then shared in class.	Individual recall- making notes of key experiences, written descriptions, telling partners online. Discussion can be organized but is technically difficult. Depending on age and the original experiences, using picture and words to recall is possible, sharing is more difficult. Older pupils can say what it means, but this process is best left to guided discussion , except in the upper

		school, where reflective writing can be used followed up with online group discussions.
practicing	Classroom /homework	This is our main field of work. Pupils need imaginative, creative ways of using what they know in varied ways- perhaps even designing tasks for each other. Important to differentiate the tasks so that all students can participate. Regular, individual feedback by mail can be given. Pupils need occasional access for direct help via telephone or video. Longer term tasks such as observation, learning diaries, reading diaries, portfolio of art work, are better and can be more easily planned.
Growing abilities	Over a month of intensive practice first signs of sustainable learning can be determined	After a month we can expect students to get used to this kind of learning.
Transformative learning		

Obviously online learning and home schooling are missing key elements such as learning from someone - the teachers, learning through being in a learning group, rich direct experience and being attuned to learning. Nevertheless, it will support the learning under these special conditions if teachers remember the basic principles of Waldorf learning.

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