Who teaches, learns

Presentation for the ITEF meeting by Jon McAlice, May 25, 2025

In 1919, shortly before the beginning of the first teacher's course, Rudolf Steiner emphasized that the development of education for the future would hinge on the question of teacher education. It is, as far as I know, the only time he spoke at length about teacher education. As was his art, he did not outline a program for educating teachers but did highlight what we should be looking to achieve through such courses:

- An anthropological understanding that recognizes human development as a maturational process of embodiment originating in an individual's pre-earthly existence.
- A sense that learning is the process through which the individual is engaged in solving the riddle of their own existence and the will to help them do so
- Development of an inwardly mobile thinking, a non-schematic thinking - teacher education is not simply a question of exchanging one pedagogical narrative for another but of enabling perspective teachers to awaken new capacities within themselves.
- Awakening of the urge to discover the individuality of the child.

When one reads the lecture, without getting too caught up in the details but going with the flow, one discovers that Steiner enacts or embodies the transformation he believes is needed. He speaks with something like a passionate alacrity, moving from one topic to another enthusiastically and dynamically then weaving them together in such a way that something else shines through. And one discovers a certain urgency in his words.

Over the course of the last three or four meetings we have been considering different aspects of the role of research in the work of teacher educators. In the course of the presentations our focus has shifted somewhat away from a primarily academic understanding of research to one in which research is understood as an intentional practice focused on refining, deepening, transforming one's own teaching capacity. This echoes Paulo Freire's dictum: "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning." In this context, research can be understood as self-initiated, self-directed adult learning and an essential aspect of maintaining a healthy teaching relationship with one's students.

Last month, Peter Lutzker spoke about this ongoing intentional learning process as one of transformation and characterized transformation as a core gesture of Waldorf education. I found myself asking, as I listened, what do we mean by transformation? And, in teacher education, what is it that we want to transform? When we speak of transformation, it is always something that is transformed. I thought it might be helpful to characterize it more concretely.

I'd like to describe a process that we take students through here at the Nature Institute. We often work with teachers in post-graduate courses or with teachers who have had no training but are already in the classroom. What we focus on are series of practices that allow students to shift the way they place themselves in relation to their experience of the world. Recently as it is springtime, we have been working with buds. We begin with sauntering. Wandering through the forest and simply

noticing the way the buds on the different trees appear. Certain trees lend themselves well to closer observation as their branches are closer to the ground and because they tend to have buds at various stages as one moves from the trunk of the tree to its periphery. These are the oaks, the hickories and the younger beeches. Students spend time observing in the field, sketching, taking notes and sharing their discoveries with one another. Then we bring chosen branches inside and look at them more closely and in doing so help students articulate more clearly what they are seeing, help them distinguish the various parts of the bud and early leaves and start to build a picture of the budding and leafing process based on their observations. Then they return to the field and spend time with one budding branch, during which we ask them to sketch in as much detail as possible the bud in its various stages.

At this point, we tend to step back and ask students to share their discoveries concerning both the budding process and their own relation to it. They are asked to bracket any preconceived notions or acquired explanations and just speak out of the experiences they had over the course of the morning. We encourage them to also share the questions that arose.

In a next step, students are asked to reimagine the various stages of the budding process as vividly and exactly as they can. From the imagination, they then do charcoal sketches to capture the changing form of the buds and the emerging leaves and, using watercolors, on separate paper, attempt to recreate the color impression. This latter is especially challenging. One discovers very quickly that the imaginative experience of the color changes touches on a very fine inner feeling quality. Only after students have gotten a feel for the quality of the color change, do we ask them to bring form and color together.

As a final step, we ask them to write the story of the budding/leafing as though they were narrating it for someone.

During a course students repeat this process numerous times. If we are working with buds, we will look at different kinds of buds – from bulbs and corms and rhizomes and each time go through this process of experiencing them, observing them, getting to know them in detail, returning to them, then recreating them through the imagination before finally narrating them.

This sequence, which draws heavily on what Steiner had to say about adult education in the last year of his life, begins with bodied experience in context and the heightening of attentiveness by lingering with the details. It gives students the opportunity to move closer to the perceived world and enter into it with their interest. Sketching in the field helps them sharpen their capacity to perceive the things as they are. The reflexive dialogue at this stage is full of astonishment, the wrestling with bracketing and questions. Re-imagining the observed buds – this is in Goethe's sense exact sensorial imagination – is done in silence. It is a respectful bringing the perceived to life within one's own soul. Sketching, then searching for the color impression and then combining them bring students into a more intimate participatory relationship with what they had previously met in the world. Specific gestures and qualitative expressions of the different buds come to experience. The relationship to the world turns itself inside out, or perhaps outside in. Students describe the narration as giving voice to something that before had seemed mute.

This is of course possible with many different topics. Martin Rawson described something similar for the work with Steiner's pedagogical lectures. The result is a growing trust in one's own capacity to respond creatively and appropriately to what the situation needs. The shift from the idea of teaching

to the flowing forth of pedagogical will. But what seems to be important is that students are given the opportunity to explore the same thing through different ways of knowing – clarification of content – in the case of buds how they appear – grasping the time gestalt, movement, the encounter with the qualitative impressions that arise through imaginative recreation and finally telling the story. Artistic work and imaginative work show themselves in such a sequence to be valuable aspects of an expanded knowledge practice.

This is the challenge we set ourselves each time we design a course: Can we engage the students in practices that enable them to bring the experienced world to life within them and thus take a step towards overcoming the threshold that arises when we take the epistemological experience of separateness to be constitutive of reality.

I'd think that this is the process of transformation that lies at the core of what we might hope would happen in a teacher education program: the development of knowledge practices that engage the entire human being and the resultant shift in relationality. Teacher education programs do not produce teachers. We know that. One learns to be a teacher in the classroom. What we can give students are practices that allow them to be intentional participants in this learning process. And perhaps open for them experiential horizons that dispel the illusion of a boundary between inside and outside, allowing them to better navigate the resonant dialogical space that brings a classroom to life.

Questions to work with in the breakout groups:

- Can you share specific approaches through which students can practice shifting the nature of their experience of relatedness to the world?
- How do you enable the students to become the primary agents in the self-transformation of this experience of relatedness?