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The culture of learning, changes in young people's mentality and the individual's own world (*trans. John Mason*)

If nowadays we wish to reflect on the learning culture and the qualities of a 'good school', it is a good idea to bring into the equation the changed nature of young people's mentality. The forms of knowledge and the modes of address that young people of today bring with them into school cannot be considered in the second or third rank of conditions that we could 'also' be taking into consideration, for they impinge on every standard school situation. This unmistakable change in mentality is related to the fact that individuals in their daily lives grow and intermingle far less in wider compulsory collective orientations and regulatory systems than previous generations. People have become culturally self-sufficient. Everyday life is currently less regulated by norms than oriented around preferences. Everyone is faced with the opportunity and the requirement to make selections, and this optionality has expanded the room for manoeuvre for the subjective self. On the one hand, this gives a decided bonus. On the other hand, the need for greater non-transparency in the modern life-world gives such optionality all the more often a defensive downside. For here rejection and avoidance, 'I-prefer-not-to' attitudes, become more common than decisions decidedly in favour of something. And this brings problems with it.

Today's 'self-sufficient' individual rigs up his own world, taking its building blocks overwhelmingly from broadly disseminated forms of popular culture and from the lifestyles of his contemporary scene. The fact that for young people an 'own' world has become almost exclusively made up of norm-setting forms of light culture constitutes the point of departure for my argument. Their 'own' world, everything they filter out from the incessant stream of images, themes and experiences as being plausible, is what represents in the end for these young people the self-evident centre of importance for their life's reality. For young people, 'own' worlds are like a continent against which other realms of reality appear as foreign islands that they have difficulty understanding. What is more, the habits, prejudices and underlying convictions of their 'own' world are always taken on board like basic rations, as long as they remain on their 'island'. As a result the world of the institution, for example, with its different rules, subjects and habits comes across as difficult to comprehend. In this way an accompanying element of underlying doubt accompanies the experience of the pupil in all those domains that are clearly different from his 'own' world. To use the language of fashionable weather forecasts, we could say that an 'experienced foreignness' is on the increase. In relation to the customary relationship to school this means that typically the gap between the highly selective 'own' world of the pupil and the universal educational norms of the school are immeasurably wide.

As a result, it becomes a core task of the school to support the pupil in opening up and transcending their everyday routines. Against the background of this initial thesis, I see the professional activity of the teacher as being as follows: 1) Thematically, the teacher could be the pupils' guide to unfamiliar mental worlds, 2) atmospherically he could be the protector of

the setting, and 3) motivationally he could be an inciter to anticipation. What do I mean by this?

The teacher as a 'guide into unfamiliar mental worlds'

The question of the 'approachability' of pupils, especially after the onset of puberty, becomes a key problem for all those involved in teaching in their daily work. They find themselves bound from now on to being constantly forced to start by persuading pupils that other worlds, or rather other approaches to the world, than those of their familiar everyday world might make any sense at all – and this includes the world of fictional literature, of symbols and numbers, of religious faith, of history, of the natural sciences and much besides. These foreign worlds appear to the pupils above all as incomprehensible distractions from something more important.

Proposing to students that they might explore such a foreign mental world without it seeming to be an anachronism detrimental to life or a devaluation of their 'own' world becomes a difficult balancing act. It involves removing the strangeness of the 'I' from the multiplicity of possible worlds – not by retaining an everyday perspective but, on the contrary, by issuing offers that permit perceptions of reality to be expanded. By this I am in no way proposing an avoidance of objects of the everyday world in classroom teaching but rather a learning to see them in another perspective, in a different light. In this way the 'entry' into a novel, as a fictional area of experience, inaugurates an encounter with foreign mindscapes. It makes it possible to understand perspectives other than the 'own', but it also allows those 'own' inner states to be given a language and a form that can be new and unfamiliar.

To pave the way for insight into other worlds is to work with the acceptance of foreignness. On the part of teachers, it demands an intuitive feel and a gentle touch. If needs be, they also need to be prepared unblushingly to radically simplify their teaching topics and to visually break them down into their component elements. For the pupil, to enter into a foreign mental world becomes all the more tolerable the more cognitive shelves are made available 'in their heads', where they can arrange and survey what they have recently learnt.

In this dimension of content and theme I would like to describe teaching as a process of guiding pupils into foreign mental territories. As guides, teachers encourage pupils to journey abroad and do their best to raise the reputation of this tourist trade. They are also familiar with the border crossing points. They are acquainted with the widespread ignorance of the tourist without cursing them for it. They refrain from threatening gestures and never stoop to condescending put-downs. The guide promotes the temporary joy of the foreign without undervaluing the home that everyone needs. The pupils' ability to put some distance between their 'I' and their everyday certainties must not involve proposing this position as a way of life. Teachers would do well to display the fact that they are not themselves immured in their 'own' worlds.

The teacher as 'protector of the setting'

A learning culture is also a matter of social moulding. Normal situations of classroom teaching cannot be described solely as events of thematic or didactic exchange and are not solely

determined by content. No more so than they can be conceived as nothing more than organisational rule systems. The teaching situation always presents in addition a symbolic field of meaning, in which significance and responsibility are incessantly negotiated, frustrated and secured. In this respect, too, I would like here to make use of an anti-cyclic argument. It is extremely important to incorporate symbolic counter-balances into the familiar phenomena of habitual distraction and fickleness, of lack of structure and form that characterise the everyday world. In school, pupils ought to become acquainted with dense structures.

In therapeutic and social pedagogical contexts there is a concept known as 'settings'. It signifies a combination of rules, agreements and courses of action, which regulate and cushion the standard situation of a working alliance. The rules of the setting lay down precepts and prohibitions, but also conceal within them common definitions of normality, agreements as regards targets and mental calibration. A setting is significant, then, not only in formalising order in a technical way, but it also in effect plays a role as a safeguard and in generating and expressing meaning.

In the documentary film 'Rhythm is it', which has recently received so much attention, we are shown how so-called 'difficult' young people take part in a project that is both aesthetic and social. Under the leadership of a professional choreographer, they develop a collective dance version for Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring', which at the end they perform with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. This process is, as the film shows, as full of pain as it is of pleasure. Time and again during the practice sessions, which last several weeks, a portion of these young actors refuse to abandon the habits of their 'own' world. At the beginning of every session each participant is challenged always to take up the same position. They have to stand motionless in front of the empty wall of the hall and remain for a while in silent concentration. As might be expected, a proportion of them frustrate this mini-ritual by talking, giggling, and so on. So between them and the choreographer arise repeated conflicts and symbolic fights. According to the convincing interpretation of the choreographer, the self-awareness of these young people was so meagre that they could scarcely tolerate even one serious challenging situation being created. The choreographer is persistent and wise, and in the end he convinces them. After tough group crises, the session work culminates in a brilliant performance.

I mention this example here because of the significance of the setting. Full of conflict but productively pursued, this particular example provides a rule-based framework, in which a temporary suspension from everyday habits can come about – albeit through a rule as minimal as standing at the beginning in concentration before the wall of the hall. The accomplished artificiality of the situational structure can seduce pupils, in the positive sense of the word, to set sail on this foreign situation. What is being offered here is not an approximation to the already known, not a smoothing out of differences to everyday routines. On the contrary. It is the experience of something small, firmly rooted outside the everyday. It is true that teachers are not choreographers, and school is no preparation for a dance performance. That is clear. Nevertheless, even classroom situations have an element of staging. And for a range of situations in the school's daily structure, to introduce certain 'rules of the game' that bring about a new form of self-awareness can have an effect as stabilising as it is stimulating. (Another example of the establishment of a 'weird' setting (in the positive sense) is the character of the teacher in Peter Weir's well-known film 'Dead Poet's Society').

A setting can to some extent be compared to a small collective ritual. It cannot dispose of the burden of openness, but it can make it more tolerable. The establishment and appreciative awareness of settings can bring about a form of counter-attention, which helps to dampen the diffusive consequences of today's everyday life. And young people – for all their ambivalence – have a profound need for order and form.

With respect to the social form of learning cultures, I would like to describe the teacher as a 'protector of the setting'. As a kind of purveyor of form, he protects the rules, establishes small rituals and provides the micro-world of the classroom with a set of formal guidelines and with minor recalibration. It is in the attempt and in the hope of being able to support pupils through the experience of external structures by means of building up inner structures. In school, the more the phenomena of a fixation on 'imported' 'own' worlds make themselves visible, the more significant will it be, in a skilful manner, to introduce and preserve artificial situational set-ups that are a far cry from the everyday.

The teacher as 'inciter to anticipation'

Finally, I would like to come to a motivational dimension of learning culture. This, too, will be seen through the teachers' eyes in the first instance as representing a further increase in the efforts they are called upon to make. In this respect as far as the teacher is concerned, the culture of learning has become more fragile. Very briefly, the following... In today's emotional balance of accounts, listening to an 'own' inner voice plays an ever stronger role for the individual. The voice of the internal dialogue has become louder. The inner light of the individual is switched on. Everyday talk, afternoon talkshows or daily soaps offer hundreds of examples of the way in which this internal monitoring no longer takes place in the intimacy of the private, intimate or even guilt-ridden sphere but has found in everyday communication and in the media an open stage, which forces the individual into self-scrutiny. Inner and outer arenas for thematisation permeate each other. This reinforces on-line self-scrutiny, but further undermines those weaker students who experience themselves as gooey and indecisive in the face of these many inner voices.

As a result, learning in order to know what I 'want' becomes more complicated. A diffuse awareness of duration focused on what I 'don't want' acquires all the more influence. There are, apparently, ever greater numbers of individuals whose initial response is to be defensively oriented, in other words towards the avoidance of a situation that they classify as uncomfortable, even when in the long run this creates considerable dissatisfaction. And this links to the accompanying element of underlying doubt towards all foreign worlds that I mentioned at the beginning. The individual drifts easily into danger of getting caught in the overt articulation of his/her inner dialogue with self and escapes back 'down' only with difficulty. At that point 'don't want' expressions of all kinds become almost ubiquitous.

A precondition of any loosening of such paralysing self-communication is that one is able to adopt a certain distance from one's own emotions. And here I return to my appeal for a more softly-softly distancing from the habits of the pupil's 'own' world. The road to follow here lies

in the ability to achieve an inner distance or, better, a fantasy that can pressure me, in the accounting house of my will, to try out new possibilities. This power is also dependent on an imaginative capacity, namely to draw up a picture of how good or how proud I will feel when at the end I achieve some success. It is, then, all about the capacity to anticipate as a fantasy one's own conditions of self-enjoyment and pride. It is an anticipation that can fortify me to some degree against all the frustrations that inevitably appear during a learning process. And an extension of the horizon of motivation would lie in the fact that one would no longer be glued into that sticky condition of 'Now'. One would also gain a space to manoeuvre in relation to the inner side of one's 'own' world.

Here again the teacher comes into the picture. Inevitably, the teacher is always also the actor in a scenario, and through his personal style he displays something that can be deeply meaningful for the latent self-concept of the pupil. Without being obtrusive or self-important, the teacher gives visible substance to an inner connection, namely that of an elaborated exertion and delight. In this the style of the teacher is important in that it can contribute to drawing the pupils onwards, so to speak, in appealing to and in cultivating their preparedness to exert themselves in a 'narcissistic' way. In this sense I now describe the teacher as an 'inciter to anticipation'.

Within the scope of his teaching event, the teacher should, therefore, draw such narcissistic neediness in the direction of 'pride experiences', while at the same time taking into account a narcissistic sensitivity towards offence and depreciation. Pupils long for pride experiences precisely because they so often lack them. For that reason it is important to make use of rituals of recognition and occasions for appreciation. And it is a good idea to offer practice phases and time frames that allow for ludic exercises, allowing pupils to remain exempt from evaluation.

I know that I have described this aspect with excessive emphasis. And therefore I add that – of course – teachers are no shapers of people. This they could not be – and nor should they wish to be. And yet, the masterful personal style of the teacher is an essential part of a working community that (at times) knows some success. I am thinking here of expressive qualities such as conviction, encouragement, enthusiasm. It may be that style is that dimension of the learning culture for which pupils have the most sensitive antennae. Trained from early days in audio-visual culture, they are well-practised in the art of interpreting the style quality of the teacher who is interacting in front of and with them. Style is something entirely different from good teaching method. It represents the aesthetic, performative side of the teacher's professional presence. The accomplished style of the teacher can enrich the learning culture by counteracting absence of form and inattention. An accomplished style can 'embody' those elements being offered by the teacher that the pupil might tacitly one day wish to have.