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The Study of Anthroposophy
Facilitating individual access in training

Training facilitators for anthroposophical curative education have had to ask themselves increasingly in recent years how to deal with anthroposophy in training. There are various reasons for this uncertainty. National and international regulation and formalization play a major part. Anthroposophical training providers who intend to offer nationally or internationally recognized degrees must observe the educational policies in their own country. They must, at least in part, give up their freedom in choice of content, sometimes also of method. This must not by necessity be a bad thing. It can also be a wake-up call that helps training centres to focus on essential aspects of their task. Working constructively with such challenges can help improve the training quality. It places the training on a broader – anthroposophical and non-anthroposophical – basis and makes sure that anthroposophical content and method are consciously penetrated, substantiated and integrated into the wider contemporary context. Many training centres – especially in Europe – see students arriving full of enthusiasm from their practical work placements in an anthroposophical curative education centre, looking specifically for an anthroposophically oriented training. Their choice is often led by the heart rather than the head and once the training begins they have a wake-up experience. Coming to grips with the anthroposophical foundations of the practical work – Rudolf Steiner's writings in particular – is not easy and we can no longer take it for granted that contents are accepted unreservedly and without resistance.

A second challenge I see is that curative education and social therapy have changed immensely over the last decades, having been forced to question, update or change long-cherished traditions. In their struggle with the paradigms of inclusion, self-determination, empowerment, autonomy and participation, curative education and social therapy have to continuously question their identity: a never-ending process that is as exciting as it is challenging.

The UN Convention on the *Rights of Disabled People* also calls for a new way of thinking and questions established traditions and practices. ‹The changes introduced by the Convention not only concern our professionalism as carers, they make us ask whether the old organisational forms and structures are really best suited for taking on such a task with solidarity, sensitivity and competence.› (Hähner 2005, 15). The question is what steps training facilitators need to take to meet the new requirements that affect the care situation and the collegial work. Training centres are called upon to raise these questions, make them conscious and suggest ways of dealing with them. They have to support their students and enable them to deal with the challenges: the professional competence that is expected today, the needs of disabled people, the growing issues of leadership, team work, communication, documentation and legislation.

Motivation for Training

The background, education and conditions of the students who embark on training vary widely. In many courses the age range covered is so wide that students can even belong to different generations. What brings them together is the wish to gain the professional and human competence needed to care for, live with and support people with special needs. The decision for an anthroposophically based training is, as mentioned earlier, often not based on conscious choice but on feeling. These students used to work in a centre for anthroposophical curative education and social therapy, were impressed and grew to appreciate the approach for a number of reasons.

This is where the challenge lies for training centres that, in their mission statement, proclaim their anthroposophical orientation and methodology and the store they set by a balanced approach that encompasses theory, practice and art. The training centre has made it its task to guide and support the students to prepare them for taking responsibility, reflecting on their work and grasping the underlying theoretical foundations by the time they have completed their training.

The students have the right to expect more from their teachers than one particular method, some lifeless theory and an inflexible understanding of the human being. They want to meet lecturers who have studied their own subject, and anthroposophy, extensively. Most students don't appreciate lecturers who know a lot and can quote widely. They want to experience the lecturers' own struggle with fundamental questions and contents. Rudolf Steiner called attention to this when he said: ‹In our civilization today reading a book or essay and listening to someone are seen as almost identical processes. We do not get to know people by listening to them, we only find out what they thought and it could just as well be written down. It does not suit anthroposophy to be absorbed in that way. When I hear anthroposophy from a person, I want to experience that person's essence and originality, not a spoken essay.› (Quoted from Zimmermann/Schmidt 1998, 109f.)

According to Steiner, hearing and absorbing anthroposophical contents is in the first place a meeting between people – in this case between teacher and student. The encounter with spiritual science is secondary and depends on that primary meeting. Both the meeting with the person and the meeting with anthroposophy are demanding, because they imply that we are not only brought closer to a person or to anthroposophy, but that we are ‹kept awake by an enigma› (Levinas, quoted from Mührel 2009, 159). To deal with an enigma we need to be awake, modest, open and free from preconceptions and dogmatism. This is true for human encounters as much as for the encounter with anthroposophy. Both require that we carefully feel our way towards the true essence.

conveying anthroposophical content

There are various ways of applying anthroposophical human studies in practice and conveying them in the training situation. We can focus on method – ‹this is how we do it› – which means we convey practical competence, we provide orientation and clarity, but there is

no space for questions. As a result we see colleagues who ‹know nothing but do everything.› At the institutional level this approach will ultimately result in forms, rituals and practices that no-one is able to explain or justify because they have lost their meaning.

The opposite approach starts from the view that, to work anthroposophically, we need to have read Rudolf Steiner's four fundamental works several times, studied them in depth and understood them. There is something to be said for this approach, too, but it runs the risk of neglecting or ignoring the bridge that joins theory and practice. As a result we have colleagues who ‹know everything and do nothing.› At the institutional level we then tend to hear: ‹we should really…› or ‹this is what should be done.› There is no space for new developments and wishful thinking and unattainable ideals prevail.

Rudolf Steiner's *Education for Special Needs* shows ways of dealing with both kinds of one-sidedness, should they not have been fully overcome yet in practice and training. Steiner's succinct suggestion, that ‹he will then do everything else in more or less the right way,› (Steiner 1985, 35) does not refer to the beginning of a process but to its conclusion. As we learn in the second lecture of this book, there need to be three stages before he can ‹do things in the right way›: impartial observation, empathy with the child's situation so that one can understand it and a transformation process that eliminates all feelings of sympathy and antipathy so that the ‹objective picture› can arise. (Steiner 1985, 35)

These steps apply not only to the meeting with the disabled person, they are fundamental laws of interhuman relationships. They can be practised and deepened, in curative education and social therapy, but also among colleagues and in training. Meeting another person is ‹being kept awake by an enigma› (Levinas, quoted from Mührel, 2009, 159). This means that we have to gently feel our way towards the other's essence or individuality. We need a particular skill to achieve that, because ‹he will only find out how to do it in each case if he lets himself be guided by the child's inner essence.› (Steiner 1985, 74). Allowing oneself to be ‹guided by the other's essence or individuality› is the leading principle in curative education. It is ‹a cumbersome task, but it is the only real one.› (Steiner 1985, 74) The stages and processes described apply also in training. When relationships develop between trainers and trainees, or in the meeting with anthroposophy, they can be the ‹path of knowledge that aims to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe.› (Steiner 1982, 14).

Balance in Teaching

I would like to refer to Steiner's lectures on the meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being (Steiner 1977, published in English as *Balance in Teaching*), bearing in mind that there is a huge difference between educating children and educating adults. I am nonetheless convinced that the law described in those lectures is immensely important in training, in the relationship between trainer and trainee and in the way anthroposophy is handled.

The students who come to the training centres want to work in curative education or social therapy and they want to deepen and extend the theoretical knowledge and practical skills they have acquired so far. It is our responsibility as trainers to support the students during their training in unfolding their own human and professional potential. In the first lecture Rudolf Steiner describes a basic prerequisite for teachers that applies equally and

unrestrictedly to trainers: ‹[…] the teacher must have a sense, a feeling for what esotericism essentially is.› (Steiner 1977, 11) As trainers we must not judge our students merely by how they live, work and learn at this moment. We need to see their future potential and let ourselves be guided by that, a process similar to that described earlier of carefully approaching the other person's essence.

In the second lecture of *Balance in Teaching* Steiner describes three basic attitudes that are necessary in teaching: respect, enthusiasm and protectiveness. (Steiner 1977, 39). They can, in my view, be directly transferred to the training situation and rephrased accordingly:

- have respect for the individual biography that has led the student to the training centre
- feel enthusiasm for his or her future possibilities or potential.
- be protective of what the individual student experiences at this moment.

Respect for the past, protecting the present and enthusiasm for the future potential – are attitudes that show our appreciation of the students. They might be aware of this appreciation and it might even be a source of strength for them. The students place their trust in the people who teach them, in their work places as well as in the training seminar. They want to be shown how to deal with the theoretical foundations of their profession and with anthroposophy. It is less important for students to see what their teacher knows than to witness the process the teacher goes through, the teacher's own struggle, because ‹it is not ready-made knowledge that is of value in life but the effort that leads to ready-made knowledge and in education that effort is particularly valuable.› (Steiner 1977, 19).

Although Steiner said this about school teachers, I think it applies equally in adult education. The purpose of training is to enable students, once they have graduated, to act out of their own intuitive creativity – guided by the other person's essence rather than just taking over recipes and carrying out orders. Students therefore need to be introduced to facts and contents in the right way so that they can internalize these contents and transform them for themselves. Steiner compares the process with that of digestion, pointing out that nobody wants to eat pre-digested food, but that ‹some things have to be taken in in a particular form and gain validity only once they have been processed by the individual person.› (Steiner 1977, 41)

The steps described in Balance in Teaching

In the third lecture of *Balance in Teaching* Steiner presents three developmental steps that ensure that anthroposophical human studies don't remain lifeless theory but turn into fruitful practice: ‹As teachers we must study the human being; we must come to understand the human being through meditation; we must hold the essence of the human being in our memory – then the memory will become vigorous life.› (Steiner 1977, 52).

In the course of the lecture we realize how important these steps are as a basis for a living, fruitful teaching practice. I think that the three steps apply equally to the study of anthroposophy, for lecturers as well as for students. The only difference between the two is that the instructor should have made the three steps at least initially and that he or she gives

the students enough time to take them too. For this we need trust in the student's potential because these steps might take more time than there is available in training and the third step might not be possible until long after training has ended.

Students in training study anthroposophy mostly by reading texts and listening to lectures. Access through artistic activity is essential too (cf. Schmalenbach 2011, Fischer 2006) but it plays less of a part in the context discussed here.

The study of Rudolf Steiner's written work is immensely important as is shown in the excellent book *Anthroposophie studieren* (Zimmermann/Schmidt 1998) which presents creative ways of dealing with Steiner's work. The book starts from the fact that many people find it really challenging to read Steiner's writings. The statement that ‹the study of anthroposophy is, for all kinds of reasons, not satisfactory and is therefore omitted or reduced to conveying a doctrine› (Zimmermann/Schmidt 1998, 8) must, in no way, be morally judged.

Trying to strike a balance between the extremes of ‹omitting› and ‹indoctrinating› is an exciting challenge for training facilitators. No limits are set to the creativity and ingenuity, the authenticity and congruence of the trainer.

Rudolf Steiner himself describes the reading of his writings in various places as difficult. He does not ask for blind belief but wants us to test the contents against our own experience. In his introduction to *Occult Science* he wrote: ‹The author says it frankly. He wishes above all for readers who are not prepared to blindly absorb what is described, but make the effort to examine it against the insights of their own soul and the experiences of their own life. (This refers not only to spiritual scientific examination based on supersensible research methods but, above all, to examination through unbiased, common-sense thinking which is indeed possible). He wishes, above all, for cautious readers who only accept what can be logically justified.› (Steiner 1977, 14f.)

Elsewhere Steiner explains how important it is to work through contents inwardly because ‹in writing it down I condense what has come out of warmth and deep sentiment into a dry mathematical style. But this style in itself can be an awakener since it requires readers to generate the warmth and sentiment within themselves.› (Steiner 1982, 436).

The three steps of absorbing, understanding through meditation and acting creatively out of knowledge of the human essence (Steiner 1977, 52f) are very demanding indeed and need time, support, trust and, above all, adequate mentoring. Gaining understanding of Steiner's writings is a process of several stages that again involves the three steps of perceiving, understanding and acting. Coenraad van Houten (van Houten 1999) speaks in this context of seven steps, analogous to the seven life processes: breathing, warming, nutrition, secretion, maintaining, growth and reproduction:

- perceiving
- forming a connection
- digesting
- individualizing
- practising
- growing faculties
- new creativity (van Houten 1999, 54ff).

Students need to be accompanied on this learning path in a way that allows them to find their own access to anthroposophy and its view of the human being. Each step on the way is individual and brings new possibilities but also new obstacles and barriers (van Houten 1999, 153ff). These difficulties can find expression in a distanced and critical attitude or rejection, but also in unreflected indulgence or dogmatism. As trainers we must be able to deal with such obstacles and with the resistance of students. The anthroposophical contents touch and challenge the students. Resistance and annoyance can be expression of an intense inner struggle and are therefore positive.

This is not always easy in the everyday routine but needs respect for the past, protection of the present and enthusiasm for the future potential. These are abilities that Carl Rogers saw as fundamental for building person-centred relationships: ‹Empathic understanding, appreciation or not-judgemental acceptance and congruence or realness.› (Pörtner 2004, 29). Mentoring students in this way is challenging but it allows them to find their own individual way and their own individual access to anthroposophy.

Conclusion: empowerment in training

In the training centre anthroposophy is a central point of reference and, as such, has to be transparent. Anthroposophy has to come to life for the students and must never be dogma or rigid superstructure. The main criteria in training are the quality of the meeting of all involved and the study of Rudolf Steiner's work and of the relevant secondary literature.

Trainers must be able to not want to solve riddles but live with open questions. Individual ways of access should be open to students. That means, as trainers we need to have confidence in them and give them space. Trainers should have a clear picture of their own motives with regard to anthroposophy and continue to practise their ability to shape relationships in everyday life.

I started my contribution by asking whether the new principles in social care that introduced radical changes in terms of professional competence and organization at the work place will also affect the training centres. I will therefore end with an unusual comparison between training and the practice of supporting people with special needs. The principle of ‹empowerment› gains ever greater importance in social care. It goes back to the civil rights movements of the 1940s which were originally inspired by the African movement for independence. Empowerment means leading people towards independence so that they learn to cope with challenges and to find their own individual answers to questions and problems. The principle that was later transferred to the field of social care aims at making the person who seeks for help independent of the helper.

It is based on six building blocks which it uses to confront ‹the learned helplessness with the philosophy of human strengths.› (Herriger 2006, 72ff.) ‹The subject model of the empowerment concept – to summarize the argument – is based on the firm belief in the ability of the individual to achieve, out of his or her own strength, greater autonomy, self-realization and authority.› (Herriger 2006, 73). The statement can be transferred to our work with people with special needs and it can be a goal in competence-oriented training that fosters self-

reliance. I will not list the six building blocks here but re-phrase them for the training situation without changing their essence.

In terms of empowerment it is essential when we mentor students – also with regard to their dealing with anthroposophy – that we

- trust into the ability of each individual to achieve self-realization and manage their life successfully
- accept the individual's own will and respect unconventional life plans,
- respect the students'‹own ways› and ‹own goals› and abandon standardized support programmes and narrow time frames,
- don't offer patronizing expert views with regard to the definition of life problems, problem solutions and desirable future lives,
- orientate ourselves on the student's future
- apply a ‹rights perspective,› also with the students, that allows for free space and active participation.

I will not elaborate further on the six building blocks. In my opinion they can help training facilitators to evaluate their work and question their approach again and again. I think that an approach that is based on these building blocks is better able to deal creatively with any challenges that might present themselves in the training situation. Over and above that, the empowerment principle allows for a more adequate – and more stress-free – mentoring of students if the aim is to enable them to practise anthroposophical curative education and social therapy and bring out its motifs and contents in a way that is appropriate and fruitful in our time. In this model, we are as trainers no longer the wise professors who are always right but ‹companions on the learning path› (Brater et al. 2007). We empower the students to find their own access that is suited to their particular situation. They learn to work creatively and reflect on their practice of anthroposophical curative education and social therapy. A middle path is found between the two extremes described earlier – form without meaning and meaning without form – that will allow for a fruitful practice that is relevant to our time and at the same time ensure greater recognition for the anthroposophical approach to curative education and social therapy. Which means we also do justice to the request with which Rudolf Steiner's ends his *Education for Special Needs*: ‹If you are part of a spiritual movement you must make this spiritual movement fertile for practical life; the spiritual movement will then be seen as a living movement.› (Steiner 1985, 189)

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