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The Top Ten Lessons from Steiner's 1919 "Seminar Course" Given to the Teachers in the First Waldorf School

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the first Waldorf School in 1919, gave many lectures in the course of his lifetime on subjects ranging from agriculture and medicine to education, most of them to general audiences. In the spring of 1919, Emil Molt asked Steiner to direct a school for the children of the workers at his cigarette factory. The *Seminar Course*, as Steiner called it, was given in late August/early September to a group of twelve individuals who would become the first Waldorf teachers, most of whom had not been teachers by trade up to this point. Once the school opened, Steiner continued to meet with the teachers and give them suggestions and directives on teaching up until his death in 1925. Many of Steiner's lectures are collected in books published by the Anthroposophic Press. There is also a great resource online where over 100 of Steiner's books and lectures are available for listening for free at www.rudolfsteinaudio.com.

A little bit on my own journey with this material: I have had a fascination with the *Seminar Course* for years because it is the first Waldorf teacher training. I have read these lectures in bits and pieces over the years but wanted to read them in order and one day at a time the way they were delivered, with an eye toward both education in general and homeschooling in particular. I really believe what longtime Waldorf teacher Keith Sagarin says; "What Steiner had to say leaves open many more possibilities than are available in practice today." (Sagarin blogs at *What is Education?* which can be found at <http://ssagarin.blogspot.com>)



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So when my friend and fellow homeschooler, Alison, asked for advice on where to start with reading Steiner, I asked if she wanted to read these "Seminar Course" lectures together; and then I decided to start a blog and record the experience. You can find our reflections at The Steiner Cafe on my website: www.waldorfinspiredlearning.com

The *Seminar Course* given to the first Waldorf teachers is collected and published in three different books: *The Foundations of Human Experience, Practical Advice to Teachers, and Discussions with Teachers*. There are 14 days of lectures; the *Foundations* lectures were given in the morning each day, the *Practical Advice* lectures came late morning/early afternoon, and *Discussions* then took place in the late afternoon.

And now, here we go with the *Top Ten Ideas* from Steiner's *Seminar Course*, the training course given to the teachers in the very first Waldorf School in the summer of 1919.

1. The *Seminar Course* Lectures Were Given Over Just 2 Weeks

One of the most fascinating aspects of this *Seminar Course* is that it lasted only 14 days, from Aug 21 to Sept 6, and then the first Waldorf School opened the next day. In this relatively short time, Steiner spoke on his philosophy of education, gave specific indications for specific subjects and addressed questions of the soon-to-be teachers. It is interesting to note that Steiner structured these lectures in a daily rhythm similar to what we attempt to create in Waldorf-methods teaching even today: the morning lectures were the most intellectual, the lectures on the philosophy of man; the late morning and early afternoon lectures were on the specifics of the



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curriculum including child development and examples for different subjects; and the later afternoon lectures were more open questions and answers. In this way, Steiner was modelling the rhythm of the day to reflect the way we learn best, with more academic and intellectual pursuits in the morning, practical work in the late morning and early afternoon, and then the more informal and open activity in the later afternoon. All of this in just two intense weeks of gathering the new teachers together! Then the school opened, and of course many adjustments were made in the first months and years of the school.

Lesson: Study, make reasonable preparations, then begin, adjusting as you go. I think many of us Waldorf-inspired homeschoolers get hung up in the early stages, trying to figure it *all* out and wanting to “have it right.” Just jump in!

2. The Purpose of Teaching & Curriculum is Balance & Integration of our Full Humanity

Steiner’s whole purpose for agreeing to open the first Waldorf School was to contribute to social renewal. He was involved in the Theosophical Society, which became the Anthroposophical Society, a group of folks in Germany who gathered in cafes to discuss bringing about a “threefold social order” to spark social renewal in post-WWI Germany. The founders of this first Waldorf School felt it was a cultural deed that would bring about reforms and revolutionize education. In the Opening Address, Steiner spoke of a desire for “a renewal of modern spiritual life.”

Steiner’s philosophy of teaching: “Teachers must ask themselves what natural talents are hidden in every person and what they must bring out in



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each child so that the pupil may finally realize his own humanity in balanced integration. Whether the child will one day be a doctor or a ship-builder need not concern the pedagogue who teaches him at the age of 6. The teacher's task is to make him into a full human being." This is a goal with which many homeschoolers can agree!

Regarding the curriculum, Steiner made some outlines that he shared with a few of the organizers of the first school, but there was no written curriculum. Steiner was opposed to "a timetable with military precision" and wanted the teachers to "proceed in accordance with what arises out of the lessons" with a "good idea of the stages of child development." In his lectures, he was aware that this was a great responsibility; he stated "A curriculum that from the start lays down the timetable and all sorts of other things completely eliminates the art of teaching. And this must not be." This stance by Steiner has been the source of the reluctance of many to write a curriculum down. However, it is important to note that according to Karl Stockmeyer, one of the first teachers, Steiner *did* intend to write down the curriculum in more detail, but he never had a chance to do so before he died in 1925. Teachers need a starting point, particularly new teachers just learning these methods, and so over the years documentation began, starting with the book *The Curriculum of the First Waldorf School*, put together from Steiner's notes and simple outlines of the subjects by grade that were taught in the first school.

Lesson: We each create our own Curriculum – teaching is an art. Even if you choose to purchase a "complete curriculum," this is really a jumping off point and you will still, by necessity, make changes suited to your child or children. Also, the Waldorf curriculum has such a great deal of material in it



that even the first teachers in the first year could not get it all in! Teachers sometimes had to forego some lessons or subjects for others – so, pick what speaks to you, what moves you and teach from that place!

3. There was Compromise from the Beginning

Even the very first school involved compromise. In the spring of 1919, Steiner wrote a memo to the Minister of Education, excerpts of which can be found in Karl Stockmeyer's book, *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum for Waldorf Schools*. (Stockmeyer was one of the first teachers, one of the few with a teaching background.) In Steiner's memo, he explains his willingness to adjust the Waldorf School's curriculum so that students can change to a state school if necessary; however, Steiner asks that the Waldorf School be free to "use the available lesson time during the first three years according to its own educational principles only." Steiner goes on to ask for this freedom during two other phases; he then says that at the end of grades 3, 6 and 8, students in the Waldorf School would "reach the same standards of achievement as any State schools." In a later lecture, Steiner explains that the aims of the Waldorf School are *not* "founded on fanaticism, but always on objective reality" and thus there had to be compromise from the start. He describes it as always attempting to "bring two contradictory forces into harmony" that of "our ideals" and that of "conforming to what lies far from our ideals." And in order to bring these two contradictory forces into harmony, we must have flexibility.

Lesson: Flexibility and compromise are required from day one! There is no perfect way; there is no perfect Waldorf school or homeschool. Steiner even



suggested that we start with the ideal in mind, and make compromises from there based on our circumstances, on objective reality.

4. Stories and History Form the Foundation of the Curriculum Including Geography

Steiner spoke of the importance of finding “the right material for telling and retelling.” He stated that the purpose of telling and retelling stories is to “form the transition from dialect to educated speech” and “lay the foundations for a correct style of writing.” Steiner also believed that stories speak to us on a deep level; he stated that we should “tell stories in a way that evokes a kind of silent thrilled awe” and that the stories are then “transformed into understanding and interest.”

Steiner did make a few lists of the story and history curriculum, although much of the specifics on history comes in later lectures. His lists begin with fairy tales in first grade, animal fables and how animals live together in real life in second grade, and biblical stories as part of history in third grade. It is interesting to note that the stories listed for grades 4-8 vary somewhat from list to list, indicative of some other contradictions Steiner made. In the Seminar Course, Steiner also speaks a lot about Geography, a subject he believed to be the foundation of social renewal through understanding other cultures. Steiner said “If you can make geography itself interesting, you will actually notice that other capacities are awakened in your pupils.”

Lesson: Do not explain, but tell stories to move the whole child’s being. A great quote from Steiner: “Communication must be from soul to soul.” As homeschoolers, I think we are in a great position to strive for this: “Let your



influence arise out of your close intimacy with the children...not through artificial sensationalism.”

5. Block Teaching & Main Lesson Books Make For Efficient Teaching

In the Seminar Course, Steiner talks about staying with one subject for quite some time, often several weeks. He states that teachers can “teach much more economically than would be the case if we had to waste our time and energy on adhering to some dreadful timetable, switching from one subject to another.” This is one area where Steiner made changes over the years; his indications for the length of main lesson blocks were initially “several weeks,” and this got longer over the years, stretching to three or four weeks, even six to eight weeks in one lecture. Also, Steiner originally stated that the day should begin with singing 3 days a week and drawing the other days, but he later changed that to state the day should begin with the main lesson. About textbooks, Steiner did say concerning foreign languages, that “no text that has been composed by the publisher” should be used, only actual authors as reading material. (Steiner was committed to children learning two modern languages as well as Latin and Greek after grade 5 through what is now known as the immersion method, no translating to the mother tongue.)

Lesson: Create main lesson blocks for each subject that best suit your child, the subject and your calendar – anywhere from two to eight weeks!

6. Reading, Writing and Speech Connect Us to Our Inner Feelings and to Ancient Peoples



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The teaching of writing is addressed in almost every one of Steiner's lectures in the *Seminar Course*. This was very important to Steiner, that drawing should precede writing and writing should precede reading. He stated that "if we link the written forms with the universal forms – f with fish for example – at least we lead man back to the world again." His feeling was that writing is not of this world naturally, that both writing and reading are human inventions and thus need to be linked to earlier cultures, pre-written word. Speech also gets a lot of attention in the *Seminar Course*, and Steiner describes speech as being rooted in human feelings, our inner soul moods. Steiner stated that "language is a means by which man both reveals and forms his relationship to the cosmos." Steiner believed that speech exercises make us more flexible (adults too!) and that "speech reveals the life of the soul."

Lesson: Follow Steiner's indications for teaching writing before reading and have faith that by the end of third grade, your children will be on par with their peers. Also, remember to incorporate verse recitation daily or weekly.

7. Math, Science and Nature Are of the Spiritual World

Steiner was emphatic that the mathematics lessons take a different approach than was usual in schools at that time, just as it is today. He felt it critical that addition for example come out of the sum and had corresponding explanations for the other 3 rules of arithmetic; all of these 4 rules had their basis in human consciousness. This is where Steiner explains the idea of working from the whole to the parts, and states that "maths and pure natural science" are of the Spiritual world. Our job as teachers is to let



the concept of sum become an experience for the children. Steiner gives many examples and indications for Math in particular in the *Seminar Course*.

Lesson: Teach all four mathematical rules from the beginning, knowing that we want to create experiences that allow our children to develop their “sense-observation.”

8. The Stages of Child Development Are the Starting Point of the Curriculum & All Lessons

The Waldorf curriculum is based on distinct stages of child development. Personally, in my experience, Steiner is spot on in his description of child development. If you look today at a state curriculum or the new national Common Core, for example, these are *prescriptive* and based on the (perceived) needs of society or the teacher in a classroom (for example, children need to learn to read so that the teacher can cover the lessons or material with a large group efficiently.) In the Waldorf curriculum, the stages of child development are the starting point and thus the curriculum starts with a description of the child at any given age. Steiner said, “Teaching is always a social matter therefore account must constantly be taken of the proper age at which to develop specific forces so that their cultivation may enable the individual to take his place in life in the right way. The ability to take their place artistically in this way in the workings of the world is what we as teachers have to bestow on the children we educate.”

Lesson: Pay close attention to your child’s unique developmental stage when planning lessons, and familiarize yourself with Steiner’s cycles of development. Remember our goal is to allow their individual gifts to unfold, not to push.



9. Through Artistic Activity, the Whole Human Being is Involved

Steiner describes all of the main lesson subjects being taught using artistic activity including drawing, painting, music, modelling. He made use of the Seven Lively Arts, from ancient Greece, and gives examples of incorporating all of these into the lessons. Steiner said, that the importance of artistic activity is “to secure the strengthening of the will by artistic means.” He talks a lot about form and color and that they “vivify his whole soul’s being and bring it into a right relation with the outside world.”

Lesson: Incorporate the arts into your daily lessons, into all you do!

10. This is Spiritual Work

Whatever one’s spiritual or religious beliefs are, I think all of us drawn to this work sense a deeper sense of purpose. In the Opening Lecture on the eve of the Seminar Course, Steiner said let us give thanks to this great spirit who has gotten us this far. He felt that religion focused a great deal on after-life and that education should make use of life before birth, that our work as teachers is “a continuation of what higher beings have done before birth.” Steiner’s words ring so deeply and so true with us all even today “My dear friends, we can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task. Therefore, you will understand why, as we begin this work today, we first reflect on the connection we wish to create from the very beginning between our activity and the spiritual worlds.” Toward the end of the Seminar Course, Steiner describes what we are called to do: “Imbue yourself



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with the power of imagination, have courage for the truth, sharpen your feeling for responsibility of soul." Later in the afternoon, Steiner adds "the teacher must be a man of initiative, a man of interest in being of the whole world and of humanity, a man who never makes a compromise in his heart and mind with what is untrue (especially in the way we present our subjects), and he must never get stale or grow sour."

Lesson: Remember that we are spiritual beings, so our calling is to "teach creatively out of the spirit" and then the "art of education comes about and takes form."

I hope you'll join in the conversation at The Steiner Cafe where we explore the two weeks of lectures from the Seminar Course which Steiner delivered to the teachers in the very first Waldorf School in the late summer of 1919.

By Jean Miller, founder of www.waldorfinspiredlearning.com