

**‘My method puts the ability to do common and necessary things far above the knowledge of unusual and superfluous things.’**

## 17 I Feel my Head's Going to Burst!

The first thing I read as a freshly qualified teacher was a book called 'The Teacher's Card Index'. It was about collecting, keeping and ordering material. At that time it was not easy to get hold of good, suitable pictures and information, so one gathered anything that seemed at all usable — newspaper cuttings, pictures, brochures, postcards — and arranged it systematically in file indexes, envelopes and folders. And the teaching periodicals were shelved chronologically, perhaps even bound, but definitely with an index of topics kept on file. I am green with envy when I see what is available today.

But even today all that glitters is not gold. The flood of pictures and processed information in books, teaching packages, videos, films, schools' radio and television programmes is threatening to become an avalanche which will overwhelm us. Every subject area is dealt with. Top quality documentaries take us on adventurous expeditions to all four corners of the earth. Films on animal behaviour, plant life, ecological relationships and all aspects of the natural sciences bring the wonderful variety of creation into our living rooms. And then sound recordings: every piece of music is available, every language can be heard; works of literature are read by actors. On top of that the Internet as well — probably the most fantastic invention since the wheel. One can find information on anything and everything in no time at all. Millions of pages! Sometimes we really do feel our heads are going to burst.

In order not to drown in this flood or to simply take items on an arbitrary basis, a teacher needs sound criteria for choosing. Naturally

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some will say, 'What's that to do with me? I have my teaching schedule, I use the obligatory course materials and follow the head's instructions.' Others, however, may have found out to their sorrow that, using this strategy, they cannot quite complete the programme and have to proceed at a pace that does not allow them to deal with topics thoroughly. Such teachers take a more creative approach to their work and would like to put Pestalozzi's ideal of natural education into practice as far as possible. The considerations that follow are aimed at them, as well as at anyone who has influence on teaching schedules and teaching materials.

Fifty years ago schools still had a practical monopoly in the provision of basic general knowledge. What was available in the press and on the radio was seen as supplementary, as taking on from where school left off. But then television arrived, ordinary people started travelling abroad and finally the Internet gave the above-mentioned monopoly the *coup de grâce*. The question then arises whether there is any point any more in the school providing general knowledge that goes beyond what the pupils need for their everyday life?

One would like to be able to say, 'No, it's pointless, we'll reduce it radically and teach the pupils to use the Internet properly.' But it is not as simple as that, for it is impossible to cope with this flood of information on one's own without a relatively wide range of knowledge.

What should we do? I consider the following strategy right for this situation:

- First of all we must accept the fact that, under current conditions, the range of knowledge that the subject specialists and the producers of teaching materials and syllabuses seem to have in mind cannot be presented to and absorbed by the pupils in a way that is either educationally or psychologically correct. In every subject there are lots of attractive topics that simply have to be ignored. There is just no point in teachers and the devisers of syllabuses having a guilty conscience because not everything that is desirable can be done within the constraints of the current organisation of schools. 'Have the courage to leave gaps' is the watchword.

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- The fact that modern mass communications have relieved schools of their monopoly in transmitting general knowledge suggests we should finally realise one of Pestalozzi's most important precepts, namely to place the acquisition of *skills* above the acquisition of *knowledge*. But we must be careful not to overdo it, since in the first place every skill is based on knowledge and in the second place one must possess some knowledge already before one can acquire more on one's own. At the least one must have some idea of what one does not know and of all the things one could know.
- We should aim for *quality*, not quantity. That is more easily said than done, especially when we consider the perfection in the presentation of knowledge by television. The lengths they go to simply in order to stimulate and retain the viewer's interest in a single documentary! The costs run into hundreds of thousands if not millions! Are we, battling away on our own, supposed to be able to compete with such perfect products in a geography or natural history lesson? No wonder the pupils are bored, they are used to different fare.

The quality of the transmission of knowledge in schools must therefore lie elsewhere. We can, of course, use this or that piece of material these professionals have produced, but overall we must have different priorities. The strength of the school is that we can take the time to *lay the foundations* and that we *can go into the difficulties of individual pupils* — in brief, our teaching can be consciously *elementary*. That means a teacher will really get down to the fundamentals of a topic, first of all in his preparation and then in the presentation in class, and will deliberately go for depth, rather than breadth. In analysing the material he will separate the essential from the contingent and try to see the logic inherent in a topic to help the pupils understand it. This kind of elementary instruction is at the same time always *exemplary* in the sense that the basic concepts make it possible to understand related phenomena.

One could object that my advocacy of this elementary and 'exemplary' learning, that gets to the bottom of things and takes a lot of time, is all well and good, but it does not provide an *overview of an area of knowledge*. The educational reformer, Martin Wagenschein, who has

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dealt with the subject of 'exemplary' learning in a manner that is as thorough as it is impressive, has also looked into this problem. As might be expected, he argues against going through a systematic course in the sciences and recommends taking a single phenomenon, which has a wealth of aspects that can be exploited, as the starting point for each unit. But even he knows that 'exemplary' knowledge runs the danger of being an isolated feature of the intellectual landscape. He therefore suggests joining the areas that have been dealt with intensively by *link-bridges* consisting of *brief surveys*, well aware that they will be pure — and relatively superficial — factual knowledge. I would like to illustrate this principle by applying it to the teaching of history.

Let us assume you have dealt with the European Middle Ages by the 'exemplary' method and taken the amount of time necessary, going deeply into the legal system of feudalism, the conventions of chivalry, the customs of courtly life, the way of life of ordinary people and the quarrel between the Emperor and the Pope. You have looked at medieval literature, art and architecture and, finally, at this or that war. If you were to continue in this way the pupils would be growing grey by the time you got to the year 2000. So, whether he likes it or not — and a history teacher won't like it, for the whole of history is close to his heart — the teacher has to start hopping about, perhaps stopping briefly at the Renaissance and the Reformation, then on to the Thirty Years' War or even straight to the French Revolution.

A pity, true, but there is no other way. So he has to copy Wagenschein's linking bridges: brief summaries, which the pupils have to commit to memory without having worked through them in detail. These sequences have little value in themselves, they are just a means to an end, lightly constructed arches to connect the load-bearing piers of the bridge. The best that they can do is give the pupils some idea of all there is to find out and to encourage them — since they could have developed a basic interest in history — to determine to go into it later on, when they have time.

- The appropriate use of the Internet will increasingly become part of teaching units, not only with regard to the actual topic but also with regard to pupils' proficiency in using the medium. We must, however,

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bear in mind that the total availability of all sorts of knowledge will tend to devalue *knowledge in itself*. Since people know that they could easily access a particular piece of knowledge, it doesn't seem worthwhile actually assimilating it. Thus there is the danger that they will merely extract short-term information from the Internet, but not commit themselves to making the effort to *familiarise themselves with an area of knowledge* under their own steam. Such knowledge that is extracted from processed information will remain superficial, will not really mean anything to them, and will in no way be comparable to knowledge that has been acquired through precise observation of the phenomena and committed study. Only this latter kind of knowledge will enable a personal view of the world to develop with a corresponding awareness. It is therefore sensible to observe a certain caution in using the facilities offered by the Internet.

- Finally, we must do everything we can to avoid pupils committing themselves to their work for the wrong reasons — for example simply to get a good mark. Knowledge that is learnt simply for the sake of the mark remains on the surface and quickly sinks back into the sea of oblivion. We must always be clear about our goal: we want to arouse *interest, the urge to know, to find out things*, to get the pupils to learn, to make an effort because it gives them *pleasure*. Anything that gets in the way of this is to be avoided. We have failed if even high-school students, who have come of age and qualified for university, make a point of burning everything that reminds them of, say, mathematics and physics after their final exams and swear never to have anything to do with them for the rest of their lives. We must question our grading system if we see that it prevents us from achieving the goals set out above. The huge expense in terms of personnel, organisation and finance that schools require today simply does not make sense if the system itself works against the most important goals.