

Learner-centred Geography

Main Lessons at Michael Mount Waldorf School, Johannesburg, South Africa

Clinton D. van der Merwe¹
& Elizabeth Swanepoel²,

University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa

Having taught as a Geography teacher for 10 years in mainstream education and now working as a lecturer in Teacher Training at the Wits School of Education, a dramatic first impression as the Geography teacher at Michael Mount Waldorf School in South Africa from 2006 to 2008, was that the students had an inert sense of wanting to learn; were far more self-confident, assertive and 'sure-of-themselves' than most of their peers in conventional schooling; and were also really engaged in the idea and sense of 'community' - suggesting that Waldorf Education has a great deal to offer South Africa's education system - as it seems to educate the child more holistically.

South Africa has survived the 'teething' process of democracy and as an 'adolescent' herself, rushes forward to another period of growth, development and prosperity towards her adulthood. Education in South Africa has undergone tumultuous times and possibly the lessons and wisdom of Steiner Education can be applied in our move towards 'lifelong learning' in this new Millennium? Particularly as South Africa embarks on yet further curriculum changes and improvements in the next decade.

CLASS ELEVEN CLIMATOLOGY MAIN LESSON (16-17year olds)

In a Class 11 Climatology main lesson which I taught under the supportive and mentoring eye of an experienced Waldorf Teacher (Elizabeth Swanepoel) – the discussion centered on the mechanics of primary air circulation. After a day or two of establishing the basic tenets of air temperature; air pressure and their relationship to one another and how this causes wind – the learners were given the task of creating a model to illustrate how global air circulation (commonly known as the Tri-cellular arrangement) functions in the Earth system.

Figure 1 illustrates the imaginative genius of one learner who used a melon; toothpicks and arrows (drawn on paper) to demonstrate how the global circulation of air occurs within the Earth's atmosphere. Much written work was undertaken, although a day or two was spent on conceptualising and creating these models during the main lesson time of the school day. During this 2 to 3 week time period, children create their own 'main lesson' book - which documents the learning and content presented in the main lesson. Astronomy is another exciting example of the quality and extent of a Class 11 Main Lesson.



Figure 1: Model of the Earth's Primary Circulation.

CLASS ELEVEN ASTRONOMY MAIN LESSON

In 2008, I taught the class 11 main lesson on Astronomy where the learners are exposed to all phenomena and processes known to occur in the cosmos. I started off by incorporating music into the lesson by teaching the class to sing The Galaxy Song (by Monty Python - which is a humorous,

¹ Lecturer: Geography in Education & PGCE Coordinator, Social & Economic Sciences, Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

² Deputy Administrator & English Teacher of Michael Mount Waldorf School, Bryanston, South Africa. Elizabeth is reading towards a MEd at Rhodes University, South Africa.



yet informative start to this vast topic). Every aspect of the main lesson encompasses an artistic, intellectual and possibly physical task to the learning process. Figure 2 demonstrates the level of effort (and pride) that each learner invests in his/her main lesson book.

In every main lesson the teacher endeavours to create room for critical thought and abstract thinking. We encourage learners to ask questions and challenge conventional wisdom (a task that keeps the teacher attentive and on top of matters). After a couple of weeks, having taught Waldorf educated children, I found the learners far more 'engaging' and 'broad-minded' - as they have been encouraged to really think throughout their schooling.

Steiner felt strongly that teaching is an art (Clouder, 2003: 23). Fundamental to the art of

education is the perception of the child and understanding childhood as an integrated physical and spiritual process (Clouder, 2003: 23). This will then lead the teacher to an understanding of what needs to be taught; when; and how (Clouder, 2003: 23). "It is essential that we develop an art of education which will lead us out of the social chaos into which we have fallen. The only way out of this social chaos is to bring spirituality into the souls of men through education, so that out of the spirit itself men may find the way to progress and the further evolution of civilization." (Steiner, in Childs, 1991: i). ♦



Figure 2: An extract from a Class 11 learner's Astronomy main lesson book.

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For the full, original paper please contact the author clinton.vandermerwe@wits.ac.za. Clinton would like to thank Elizabeth to agreeing to this process (as much of this paper is based on work from her MEd); and both authors would like to thank and acknowledge the support and encouragement of Michael Mount Waldorf School and also the class eleven student who allowed the reproduction of a page from her main lesson book.

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