

# The Relevance of Handwork and Craft

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Edited transcript of a lecture given by Bernard Graves

What is the role of hand and craft work in the unfolding of human and social development? This long, rhythmic process of development continues from early childhood into adulthood and on throughout life - a human being is in fact never complete, finished, as it were, with his or her development. A human being is continuously in the process of becoming. When and where such an attitude survives, is cultivated by parents as regards their children, teachers in respect of their classes and amongst adults generally in relationships with each other in daily life and work, only then, I believe, can there be a fertile foundation for the potential creativity in each individual.

In whichever area we work, there are certain intentions, attitudes to our work that can be shared, including an appreciation of each other. For those of us involved in handwork, craft or manual skills education, whatever the age of the pupil, student or trainee, we share in and bear witness to an area of activity that is uniquely human, namely that creativity of the human spirit which is carried out by our hand, perhaps the one organ that most differentiates us from all of the animal world.

In the animal realm there are of course numerous examples of fine and, to us, unobtainable achievements. Take for example a spider's web or a bee's honeycomb. These animals, however, all work within certain fixed parameters and the bee can only do what a bee can do. A human being, on the other hand, is not created to be fixed, patterned to a certain existence, stereo-typed in his or her movements. The body and hands are meant to be the instrument for the human spirit that seeks expression within the body and beyond it into the material world as revelation of itself.

When making a candle, for instance, taking the raw materials provided by nature, in this case beeswax and the cotton for the wick, we start a host of creative processes that culminate in the single act of lighting the candle. What was previously held within the raw materials is released, through human activity in creativity, in the light and warmth of the burning candle. Such an image, I hope, helps serve to show the purpose of a human being's creative power. There should moreover be no boundaries in a human being's creativity, for unlike the instinct of the bee out of which a honeycomb is built, human actions are not meant to be actions in response to given situations but free actions that transcend the limitations imposed on the animal, actions that serve the well-being of one's neighbor.

Rudolf Steiner, when speaking of handwork in the school curriculum, said the purpose was not to train weavers, potters, etc., but rather for the pupil, by practicing such work, to be able to stand more secure on leaving school, with a basic confidence for managing the practical affairs of life. This

works inwards, as it were, weaving an inner multi-coloured garment whose colours will not fade or threads snap and unravel at the first hurdle presented by life.

Today, with technological achievements providing for our every need, practical involvement with the material world has all but terminated. There are now diminished opportunities in life for children and adults to be creative in their play or work. Not only do we forgo the joy and sense of achievement that making something can give us, but without the possibility to be creative there is limited or minimal access to the essential formative powers handwork can foster in the growing child and adult.

### **THE UNDERMINING OF THESE FORMATIVE POWERS**

It was at first a relatively simple machine and tools that almost overnight changed our approach to life and work. The machine that has now largely replaced the hand can be seen in its actions as mimicking motor-activity. Today we have the smallest machine possible, a long way from the spinning jenny and the steam engine: the micro-chip. The brain function of man has now also been copied in the micro-chip. It forms the brain of the computerized machine so that with just a few adjustments this useful component can direct all manner of functions.

We know that practically every artifact used today can be made from oil derived plastics, in factories somewhere, by machine-minders whose chief quality is to survive a life of intense boredom. This is manifest where machine operators who can only respond in a mechanistic way to the commands of the machine by repetitive motor movements (actions), not lifted to the realm of skill, tire easily and cannot take real interest in their work. The basic need for meaningful work by which the individual can find expression and be of meaningful service to others, is scarcely met.

Toys and other artifacts produced in this way, and not as a result of the labor and love of the worker, take on a cold and uninviting appearance. Those who are surrounded by such a world of dead objects have little to please the eye, or in the case of the child's toy, little to stimulate fantasy and develop imagination.

In such a situation, where the truly creative process of the maker or receiver is obstructed, how can willpower be transformed to beautiful shape? For beauty in an artifact or a toy depends on the nature and texture of the materials, combined with the skill and love with which it was created.

As a further and far reaching consequence to which we are all subject with the increasing proliferation of all manner of artifacts intended for the home, for use in school etc., we have almost no need any more to do anything ourselves, except be consumers of goods. There is very little incentive to be practical, let alone artistic in daily life, since someone, somewhere has thought of relieving me of my practical involvement by offering me, at competitive prices, just that product material response to meeting human needs, the sense for the artistic, that which is uplifting to the human mind, and the ability to be creative are in great danger of being lost.

It is interesting in this light to recall what Rudolf Steiner set as challenges to the teachers of the first Waldorf School:

- to awaken the artistic sense in the one who beholds

- to awaken the faculty of creativity itself.

The question then also is, how do we balance the inevitable march of science and technology, that in so many ways can cut short our opportunities to be creative and produce what might be called a lameness of the will?

### **CHANGING IDEALS IN EDUCATION**

Before approaching this question from the perspective of education, it is worth noting what Rudolf Steiner said in his lecture cycle, *The Modern Art of Education*, given in 1923 to teachers at Ilkley: "For man today as a being of body, soul and spirit, to find his right place in social life, education must be based, founded on knowledge of man as he is in the present epoch, irrespective of pressures and outer changes in attitude and expectation we experience put forward by educationalists on human development."

He describes how our trends of thought as to what is essential in the education of children have changed along with changes in attitude to what used to be and is now considered important, the ideal of human perfection. This he follows through the Greek and Roman cultures, to the ideals of the Middle Ages and on to the time when a new aspect appeared: a swing to the development of the intellect. He who knows something, the knower, then became the ideal. Whereas previously those who could do something with their powers of soul through speech were considered the ideal teachers of education, all that is now required is knowledge. What has emerged is the ideal of the Doctor, the Professor, the man who knows, who no longer works with the soul nature as manifest in the body but is only concerned with what is invisible in the inner being of man. Attainment of knowledge is all-important. This ideal of the perfect human being has remained with us into our time in spite of many other changes.

Rudolf Steiner, however, describes a further ideal - one that has slowly emerged alongside materialism - the ideal of the universal human principle: a longing again that the whole human being be educated, led out into life, educated in body, soul and spirit.

### **WALDORF EDUCATION AND THE HANDWORK CURRICULUM**

One could say that Waldorf education is in fact about teaching out of universal, human principles, whatever the subject.

However, handwork and crafts were to have a specific task in the curriculum, namely to awaken creative powers which would find fruitful and useful application in as many ways as possible in later life and work. The reason for this is based on one of the fundamental precepts of true teaching, namely that when we engage the child in physical, practical activity, such as handwork, we are working on the soul spirit nature of that child. However, when we address the soul spirit nature, for instance, in story-telling, the results are to be found in the bodily organism.

It is consequently no less important for the handwork teacher to be familiar with the nature of soul life and the development of the child than for the class teacher. Both should work in accordance with how the child is at any time, how he or she perceives him or herself and the world.

The three phases of development from play (up to the age of 7), through the experience of beauty (the school child from 7 to 14) to the attainment of truth (the adolescent years) help the child transform what was play into the basis for his/her motivation in the realm of work.

This golden path in education forms the guideline in handwork as well. The younger child learns by play to fashion simple toys, developing what he or she makes out of stories. The handwork teacher then gradually leads the child to the awareness of colour and form in order to create artistic forms, to have a sense for what is beautiful. Later with the older child and the teenager, the sense for what is practical is awakened and developed out of the artistic way of working: learning to respond to the material, the development of manual skills and the correct use of tools. That all articles made in handwork should express beauty in some form goes without saying. It is however, equally important that the functional aspect, the way to use the article is also apparent in the particular design given to the article.

### **SOFT and HARD HANDWORK**

Some confusion has, unfortunately, arisen regarding the different areas of handwork.

Handwork refers to the soft material work using mainly unprocessed raw materials. Handcraft includes clay, wood, paper, leather etc. and is mainly taught to children from 12 years onwards.

Craft is a specific type of work and only applies in Waldorf schools where pupils have already achieved a general knowledge and range of skills in the use of different materials and tools, which they now apply to a specific craft, such as weaving.

Through the subtle direction of the teacher, the child creates out of his or her feelings, whilst being shown and guided how to care for the materials and the simple tools used. The sensitive use of colour plays an important part in the child's enjoyment of the handwork lessons: helping the child form a meaningful, personal relationship to colour can also serve to bring that child's feeling nature into harmony. This in turn can work beneficially on the breathing and blood circulation of the child.

Later in handcraft, using harder materials, for instance, stronger forces of will are needed. The limbs and the whole body are engaged in this activity. There is a difference in the experience of making soft toys, a stuffed animal for instance, to that of an animal carved out of wood. In the first instance, soft material, flat pieces of material, receive their nature from inside. In the case of carving an animal out of wood the hard material receives its nature from outside. Again in the first instance, the child makes manifest in the stuffing of the animal, the filling out processes in his or her own body. In woodwork, however, a person works like the action of water, sculpting the rock over which it flows. A child is only really ready for this sort of activity from about the twelfth year on, after the child's formative forces have developed his or her body. Only then is it possible for the growing human being to harness these inwardly acting forces and work with them outwardly, fashioning his or her materials.

Finally, in craft work, the adolescent should have a chance to find a growing sense of confidence and ability in the realm of work. Correspondingly, the desire to find where he or she can contribute something in the world around can awaken an interest in the practical affairs of life. (See further under the handwork and craft curriculum notes).

To sum up, it could be stated that while all handwork engages the whole human being, it is essentially in the following ways that handwork affects a growing child:

- it lifts motor activity to the realm of skill
- it transforms willpower into beauty of form
- it changes what would otherwise be an insignificant activity into a virtue.

Only when the worker, the pupil, the craftsperson responds sensitively to the nature of his or her materials and the correct use of his or her tools, is motor activity raised to the realm of skill. Only in working artistically with design, colour and form is willpower transformed into beautiful form. And only when these two aspects are combined in work that also allows the person to have a sense of fulfillment, a sense of true purpose in his or her work, can what might otherwise be an insignificant act be raised to the status of a virtue.

These then could perhaps be called the three transforming powers of handwork, powers that are essential for the unfolding of true human development.

## **HANDWORK AND CRAFTS CURRICULUM**

### **WHY**

True education aims to serve the needs of the whole human being, Head, Heart and Hands are brought into a particular relationship with each other in the practice of handwork and crafts. In these lessons pupils have the opportunity to 'tangibly grasp' the world and give expression to their latent creativity.

Handwork and craft activities not only serve to educate the pupils in the nature and processes involved with the different materials, the use of tools and equipment, etc., but there is also inherent the therapeutic aspect from which the pupils benefit.

For it is in the very nature of handwork/crafts to BRING ORDER and to BESTOW ORDER. To bring order to the materials used and to bestow order upon the maker.

In the practice of ceramics, for instance, a potter not only leaves his imprint, his thumb print on the clay, but is also inwardly impressed by the creative process at work.

In addition to the educational and therapeutic benefit that crafts can offer there is the definite element of manual skill training and for the older students a useful introduction to an experience of real work.

Apart from any therapeutic contributions crafts can offer, the involvement in craft work offers the pupil the challenge to learn to work from the conceptual through to the material. In this process the

pupil will be guided to experience and become conscious of exercising, at the hand of the work place, very human attributes, both on an emotional and intellectual level.

## **WORKING PRACTICE**

### 1) PREPARATION

{Design           CONCEPTUAL

{Ideation        Thinking activity

{Preparation of Material

{Plan ahead

### 2) ACTION - Process ACTIVITY Practical Involvement

The craftsperson brings his/her hands to bear upon the materials -workpiece, and works out of the mental picture that he/she has formed.

### 3) JUDGEMENT Engagement of Feelings

As I proceed I exercise judgement as to the shape of workpiece. Forming element.

## **LESSON PLAN**

Where possible younger pupils (classes 1 – 6) will receive handwork lessons on a weekly basis, guided by the class teacher and practiced at home.

From classes 6 - 12 the handwork and craft lesson take on a more formal approach with increasing time spent in the various craft workshops.

The following curriculum is an indication of the Development the handwork curriculum can take and a brief description of the pedagogical relevance for each activity.

## **HANDWORK CURRICULUM CLASSES 1-12**

### **Nursery Class**

At this age things that are done by the children are done in response, in imitation of what grown-up people do in their surroundings. In the case of the rag doll, it is better that we give the child a simple, knotted doll - one where the head piece is made by filling a silk cloth with a small bundle of wool tied around the neck, than to give the child a real look-alike doll to play with. For the child needs to exercise its powers of imagination, which it can better do with the rag doll, than the one that is realistic in every detail. The nursery class teacher also encourages the children to go outside to collect things, shells, cones, twigs, etc. These activities help the children to become acquainted with the form and the shapes of things. Imaginative arrangements of the things the children collect outside can then be arranged on a table to form a seasonal garden in which the child can play out its imaginations.

### **Class 1 - the 6 to 7 year old child**

One of the first handwork activities that can be introduced is knitting, an activity for which Rudolf Steiner had particularly high regard concerning its pedagogical value. 'Stuttgart 1921 - When we teach a child to knit or to make something, of course the thing he/she makes must have a purpose and a meaning. We are then working on the spirit of the child, and often more truly so than when we teach him subjects that are generally thought of as spiritual and intellectual'.

A child may learn to knit a simple pot holder or a scarf for his/her doll. When a child has accomplished the basic techniques of knitting he/she could then be shown how to knit a simple animal form which is then stitched together and stuffed with wool to give it form. By knitting we introduce the child to mechanism, we bring the child into movement of his/her limbs and fingers and we train the power of attention for stitches are easily dropped.

### **Class 2 - the 7 to 8 year- old child**

Knitting continues into the second year of school but in class 2 we introduce the child to crochet. We do this by way of making small articles: a ball net, a tea cosy, perhaps a small cap. In this activity the, right hand is engaged differently from that of knitting. Here the one limb is allowed to work almost independent of the other. Already at this age the child should be encouraged to choose his/her own colour materials with which he/she wants to work. In the case of the pot holder he/she

### **Class 3 - the 8 to 9 year old child**

We continue crochet, making small articles, such as jackets, possibly a jumper. Knitting also continues, and by now a personal relationship to colour should be established. Form and design should be now encouraged to involve the child's own design, not only a copy of the article made by the teacher.

This brings to a conclusion those activities in which the child's main experience is in creating solid objects out of a single thread by the formation of loops. By now the children should have acquired a sense that things not only should look beautiful, but also be functional. They should practise design, a recorder bag, for instance, where the opening to the recorder bag is obvious from the design placed on the outside of the bag. The design could be done with simple embroidery stitches.

### **Class 4 - the 9 to 10 year old child**

The 9 to 10 year old child places himself/herself more consciously into the world, he/she is now ready for bigger challenges. The pupil could perhaps be encouraged to make a simple shoulder bag by sewing suitably coloured bits of material together and embroidering the front side of the bag to a design of his/her own choosing one that expresses his/her particular growing personality. At this age practicing cross-stitch in embroidery and braiding help a child to maintain an inner uprightness; these are outer activities that can accompany his awakening objective consciousness.

### **Class 5 - 10 to 11 year old child**

By now on processes have reached down to the feet. In handwork the child may now learn to make simple articles of clothing, for instance, socks or gloves or possibly a hat. In the making of these articles the child becomes more aware, more consciously aware of the extremities of the body, of the feet, of the hands, the head, of the human form.

### **Class 6 - the 11 to 12 year old child**

Now a child is able to construct things in handwork in a much more conscious and living way. Until this time it was very much through the feelings that a child approached his/her handwork. Now he/she has become aware of the physical structure of man and animal, his/her work, handiwork can take on a more realistic nature. His/her interest and ability to participate in the world around him increases. This can be seen as a kind of balancing activity to the growing awareness of his/her own inner bodily nature, of his/her bones, and skeleton.

At this age formal woodwork lessons are introduced. For, as has been already mentioned the child outwardly in fashioning his/her material. The hands now, not only give expression to the feelings, but are more consciously directed by the will.

A suitably challenging project for class 6 would be to make a pair of slippers using leather to form the soles, knitting or felting the upper part of the slipper in a suitably strong fabric.

As well as continuing with making soft toy animals children of this class could make a set of puppets and help to build with their teacher a simple puppet theatre.

### **Class 7 - the 12 to 13 year old child**

Now that the pupil has a more conscious awareness of his/her anatomy he/she should be encouraged to hand-sew larger articles of clothing. Boys and girls can sew shirts or blouses or other articles of clothing. The boys may prefer to make a waistcoat. Apart from practical work done in this class they should now begin to learn about the making and processing of the materials they use, and how to recognise the different qualities of material.

### **Class 8 - the 13 to 14- year old child**

To counteract the broodiness at the time of puberty pupils need to be drawn out of themselves. Introducing youngsters to wider range of skills can help them to re-establish their interest and confidence in practical affairs of life.

Apart from continuing hand-sewing techniques a suitable challenge at this age is to introduce pupils to machine sewing, starting with simple techniques, for example, hemming a tablecloth which can then be embroidered by hand or cutting out a pattern for an apron, machine sewing the edges and stitching on a pocket

Pupils should also learn to care for their clothes, how to wash and iron different articles so that the shrinking and running of colours does not occur.