Journeys Through Technology and Time

by Bruce Naylor

A report on the Steiner Education Australia National Technology Forum

“One must be able to confront an idea and experience it: otherwise one will fall into its bondage.” (1) Rudolf Steiner

In the ten years I have been working at Chrysalis, seven of these were as the “front desk” person. One of my duties every day was to open the mail. I must have opened a veritable mountain of mail directed at the “revolution in learning” that the digital education materials and technologies promised. From e-books and resources to overpriced digital projectors and over engineered laptop security trolleys. Through these seven years I saw the market in textbooks undergo a radical transformation from paper-based text books to text books with an optional CD of e resources, to a CD only resource selling you a password to an online learning environment. I began to wonder how long it would be before a textbook or even a teacher was a historical artefact? What would Steiner education do about this inexorable direction education was taking?

I have often wondered what Rudolf Steiner would have made of this hi tech sandwich of metal and glass called an iPad. I liked to imagine he would probably have sniffed it first. Maybe nibbled on a corner. He even might have meditated on it as an object. I’m quite sure, as a globe-trotting teacher, he would have found a good use for it. I often repeated the accepted truism that he didn’t say anything at all about technology because, after all, he died before any of it was invented. But is that true? It turns out, like a lot of accepted truisms, that it’s not. Steiner was passionately interested in technology. And he wrote quite a bit about it. It was just that it was about the technology of his day. And those statements are quite applicable to the realm of the digital. But more of that later.

During these seven years I also underwent a transformation myself. At some point it occurred to me that if I was going to spend up to eight hours a day in front of a computer it might pay me to get better at it. Being old fashioned I started with a book. The “Dummies Guide to Adobe Creative Suite,” before eventually discovering the world of You-Tube tutorials. I began tinkering with the photocopied Chrysalis School Bulletin and, with Kelley’s encouragement, it bloomed into a magazine, first in black and white then in colour. I looked around at other programs, and branched out into website and graphic design for local businesses.

Then two years ago I was asked to teach the IT program at Chrysalis. I began to think about technology at a deeper level. So it was with great interest that I joined technology teachers from all over Australia in Melbourne to participate in the process of writing the first Australian Steiner Digital Technologies curriculum. I discovered a world of technology teachers, all teaching within the wisdom of a Steiner approach, but all passionate about technology. They ranged from early adopting programming nerds who spoke fluent code to art teachers grappling with a sea of change and growing community demand. I heard about innovative animation projects and tech interested parents who brought the contents of their nerd garage to school to build robots with the kids.

Conscious Understanding Of Technology

“We hope to succeed in planning an education for students between fifteen and twenty (or even older) that will gradually introduce them to the manifold contrivances surrounding them today. Just think for a moment of how much we fall short of this in our present civilization. You just need to ask yourselves how many people regularly use the telephone, public transportation, or even a steam ship without having the faintest idea of how they work. In our civilization, people are practically engulfed by a technology that they do not understand. Those who believe that it is only our conscious experiences that are truly important will dismiss these remarks as irrelevant. Certainly, it is easy to enjoy life consciously when one has successfully bought a train ticket to get where one chooses to go, or if one receives a telegram without having any real idea of how the message reached its destination or having the slightest notion of what a Morse apparatus is like. Ordinary consciousness is unconcerned about whether it understands the processes or not, and from this point of view it can be argued whether these things matter or not. But when we look at what is happening in the depths of the unconscious, the picture looks entirely different. To use modern technology with no knowledge of how things work or how they were made is like being a prisoner in a cell without windows through which one could at least look out into nature and to freedom.” (2)

Rudolf Steiner

It is quite clear that from this quote that Steiner advocated a dynamic and conscious relationship to the emerging technologies of the scientific worldview. It is also quite clear that he advocated that the appropriate age to begin to lift the lid and explore the technical marvels of the modern world is in year 9 or 10. But what do Steiner schools do who finish, like Chrysalis, at year 8? Do we ignore it all together? And if we are...
so dogmatic, does that mean we should not let the students use a ballpoint pen until after they study the historical era when that technology was invented? Clearly that would be unreasonable. The answer that emerged at the Steiner Technology Conference was a much more nuanced one.

The Australian Digital Technologies curriculum sits inside the much larger Technologies syllabus. This school-wide K-12 curriculum is an ambitious document that describes two distinct but related subjects. Design and Technologies; where students use design thinking and technologies to generate and produce designed solutions for authentic needs and opportunities, and Digital Technologies; where students use computational thinking and information systems to define, design and implement digital solutions. (Acara draft Technologies Curriculum 2015)

So what does that mean? It is advocating that students be introduced to an overarching understanding of the development and impact of all technologies in people’s lives, and that the world of digital technology be seen and taught as a part of this continuum.

The same applies to the IT class at Chrysalis. Any program I teach them in year 6 will no longer exist in the same form by the time they graduate. The essential skill is “interface literacy: or to put it another way “digital self esteem.”The ability to enter a new digital environment and navigate their own way, without guidance. For this reason I frequently change the programs we work with. My job is not to teach them MS word 2010 but to instill the attitude of “Technology ? I can learn that – no problem!”

There is no desire on our part to deride technical innovations, but we should be able to keep our eyes open to what they do to us, and we should find ways to compensate for any harmful effects. Such matters are especially important to teachers, because they have to relate education to ordinary life. What we do at school and with children is not the only thing that matters. The most important thing is that school and everything related to education must relate to life in the fullest sense. This implies that those who choose to be educators must be familiar with events in the larger world; they must know and recognize life in its widest context. (3)

Rudolf Steiner

References:
1: The concluding words of Chapter 1 in the first edition of Rudolf Steiner’s Die Philosophie der Freiheit (1894)
2: 5.I.1922, Dornach (GA 303).
3: 31.XII.1921, Dornach (GA 303).

Thanks are due to Stuart Rushton, the head writer on the Steiner Digital Technologies Curriculum, for his very helpful compilation of quotes from Rudolf Steiner on technology “Technology and Waldorf Education”