



## Productive Learning - What is it?

### Introduction

What would you say if you were to visit a school for disadvantaged young people and were to be told by them that this was the school of their dreams, where they learned things of both use and interest to them, that school was fun and that they put off doing their leaving certificate in order to remain there as long as possible. This is told by young people, of every colour and culture, many of them from difficult social and family backgrounds, who had left traditional schools because they had failed there. I think you would react like we did, you would struggle until you had created such a school in your own city.

The school we are talking about is in New York and we discovered it in 1983 while seeking a new form of learning. The school is called "City-as-School" and its secret is that it provides young people with a sense of responsibility, independence and achievement, while permitting them to become involved in an activity of their choice, anywhere in New York. Their activities at practice sites of every description form a basis for their educational process.

From 1983 to 1987, we both together with a group of "committed" teachers and social educationalists at Berlin university institute, the Fachhochschule für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik, prepared a City-as-School project. In 1987 we were able to open the Stadtals-Schule Berlin. Between 1987 and 1991 we made the same experiences as our New York colleagues: the young people, who, in many cases, had dropped out of school years before and lost all contact with a regular life, with difficult social and personal backgrounds, educationally disadvantaged in every sense, found a new educational path, developing a perspective, either within the traditional educational system or in professional life. Just like the New York kids from City-as-School, who are proportionally ahead of pupils from other schools in obtaining high school leaving certificates and gaining places at college.

In 1991, encouraged by our experience, we set up the Institute for Productive Learning at our Fachhochschule and started an international network of vocational orientation and vocational training projects in many different countries, which subscribe to the educational form of Productive Learning - we prefer to employ the terms educational form and educational methods than qualification strategy.

### But what is exactly Productive Learning?

Productive Learning is learning on the basis of productive activity in social "serious situations", learning on the basis of experience, of being able to achieve something important, both for oneself and one's environment. Thus, young people feel themselves to be important and valuable members of society and not simply reduced to the status of a school pupil. Productive Learning begins with activity i.e. learning is itself a product gained by experience of



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productive activity and young people acquire this with the assistance of educationalists. The young people become active, to begin with, for the sake of the activity, in order to produce something, to improve, to achieve, to prevent, express, communicate etc. It is only then that they begin to understand this process as a learning process, and to shape it as an educational process, in order to understand their experience and qualify their action.

The concept of activity is central to our educational approach. It is at once an anthropological and an historical concept: Human beings and their history is, for better or for worse, the direct product of their own activity. The "cultural-historical school" of Vigotski and Leontjew conducted a philosophical investigation as to how activity mediates between individual and species on the one hand, and nature and society on the other: According to this school of philosophy the human being, both as individual and species, produces (and destroys) through his activity both the material world and his own personality. Thus know-how and knowledge derive from activity, and learning is the necessary mental aspect of this process.

A further essential concept of the cultural-historical school is the "tool", the instrument. The history of civilization materializes in the tool, ranging from the hammer to language and science. In this perspective education is, simply defined, learning the intelligent use of tools.

The traditional school concentrates on communicating "means" and omits the "end"; the end or purpose is to be determined by "use" at a later date. But that proves fatal; for the end or purpose is thus taken out of the hands of those involved in learning; others, parents, employers, politicians etc., take the decisions as to the ends for which the school leavers would employ their means. Thus learning loses its educational quality. This is reflected in the sense of discomfort felt by many people in connection with school although very few make any attempt to resist this "dispossession". But everyone is damaged, injured or marked by it in some way.

At the heart of the philosophy of Productive Learning is the intention to reintroduce the "end" into the learning process, thereby endowing learning once more with the quality of education. For only then can those involved in the learning process decide whether or not the relationship of means to ends is acceptable to them: the pupil decides to become involved in "activity in a real life situation", as opposed to learning at school in which learning is an end in itself, and through this involvement comes to recognize the necessity of the means. The young people become active in fields of activity chosen by themselves - as a rule these are situations in professional life - and evolve a personal educational program together with educationalists and professionals by reflecting upon and generalizing their practical experiences in relation to academic, cultural, political aspects etc.

### Activity aspect of learning

By the "activity aspect" of Productive Learning, we mean that learning derives from the experience of productive activity and leads back to it. As we all know, this aspect of vocational orientation and vocational training can no longer be taken for granted. It represents rather a



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return to original forms of learning - the child's learning, the vocational learning of earlier times, everyday learning - thus acquiring their immediacy and motivation potential. Unlike school projects, where an activity situation is artificially contrived for teaching purposes, those learning become involved in regular and innovatory professional activities. These might be activities in business firms, but the school itself can also become a firm or factory, one model for such activities being the Danish production school.

Professional reality should be complex in order to make possible an integral experience; if it is too specialized, if the division of labor is too pronounced, the meaning or purpose is more difficult to recognize, it cannot serve as a paradigm for the experience of personal productivity and so has less educational significance. For this reason, large industrial concerns, administrative institutions or commercial firms are not that suitable for Productive Learning.

In the first place, the professional reality to be chosen and shaped for Productive Learning, must offer possibilities which challenge the person learning to become active. Varied activities should prevent the slackening of motivation and communicate a variety of experience. There should be activities of varying degrees of complexity both in order to accommodate the activity level of the person learning and to permit the formulation of problems.

### **Example: "Making furniture"**

Making an object for everyday use "with head, hand and heart" (Pestalozzi) is without a doubt especially attractive for a young person, since this activity symbolizes the person's emerging autonomy, his/her growing ability to satisfy his/her needs - all this by means of "classical" material and tools i.e. those which form one's experience from a very early age and fit into a long cultural tradition.

### **Example: "Making a film"**

The production of a film can, on the one hand, be relatively easy when one is aiming for a simple documentary; it can, however, require artistic and technical skills of a more advanced nature. As in the case of making furniture all the senses are involved in this activity. During the preparation important questions must receive a theoretical response, for example, when a particular interview should be made.

On the other hand those involved in Productive Learning are aiming for an activity which is useful i.e. whose end product can be used; such activities usually performed by professional people, are essential criteria in providing the individual with a sense of "total validity"; for the young people, means towards learning and practicing their adult role. When today more and more young people are held back by education and educational institutions from the professional and adult world, many of their psychological difficulties and destructive tendencies so called radical tendencies and the formation of gangs are caused by their being denied the opportunity to become involved in the production process. They are rather reduced to the level of infants in the social institutions of family and school by being kept in a state of child-like uselessness.



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For this reason it is very important to offer and allow the young people in the sense of an advance of trust, an explicit confidence with respect to their abilities "completely satisfactory and valid activities", and not to fob them off with mere assistant roles or with occasional support from the practician. Such "completely satisfactory" tasks can be found more readily in traditional areas of activity, crafts and services in which the activity is not narrowly specialized as it is the case in highly technical fields.

Productive Learning emphasizes the participatory character of productive activities. An activity can be participatory in a number of different ways,

- by its clearly recognizable social necessity (e.g. baking bread),
- by its explicit political character (e.g. journalism)
- by its innovatory function (e.g. ecological projects)
- by its organizational form (e.g. teamwork) etc.

What is always important is a conscious involvement in processes which are of clearly recognizable importance for a particular social group or for society as a whole.

Such situations which stimulate the commitment of the person learning, and are simultaneously experienced in the form of participation, can be found more often in reform oriented institutions and projects receptive to innovation than in institutions of a traditional kind. For example, co-operatives or newly created small enterprises, perhaps looking for gaps in the market, research or development institutes, nonprofit organizations, cultural projects etc. offer correspondingly greater opportunities.

### **Example: "Journalistic activity in the association for German-Turkish friendship"**

Journalistic activity for a conventional newspaper provides possibilities for writing and research. These opportunities are also offered by the regular publications of an "Association for German-Turkish friendship"; but such a publication also gives one the chance to concentrate on a culturally important theme while at the same time pointing to the possibilities of political action.

### **Personal aspect of learning**

By the "personal aspect" of learning we mean that activity and learning are chosen by the pupil because of their personal significance and importance. The "personal aspect", although its significance should be evident to all educationalists as the key factor in the learning triangle which must be emphasized in contrast to prevailing educational forms, as the factor which generates activity and, thereby, learning. Today one learns for the market, career, income, grades, examinations etc., and scarcely at all for a goal determined by the "subjectivity" of the person learning. The fact that education means the education of the personality is something that must be painstakingly rediscovered.

If one follows the "cultural-historical school" (Vigotski and Leontjew), the personality is formed by the "acquisition" of culture by means of activity reflecting a person's nature; the



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psyche is therefore developed as an aspect of this activity. Every activity has thus a "personal significance" in the process of the person's education: his/her psyche is based on previous experience and paves the way for the acquisition of culture. The personal significance can differ from the external purpose of the activity; for example, a politicians' lunch does not merely serve to still the hunger of the participants.

If a young person at school carries out an activity imposed by the teacher or the curriculum, and not in line with his/her personal inclinations, this activity does not usually serve the intended aim, but is reinterpreted by the person learning in accordance with his/her mental disposition: as a means to acquiring grades, as "filling in the gaps", as a challenge to resist etc. If Productive Learning is to be directed towards a goal, chosen and consciously striven for by the person learning, the personal significance of the desired activity must be clarified and serve as a guiding light in the performance of this activity. The person learning and the educationalist must first try to ascertain the often unconscious learning and educational motives behind the desire and the decision to become active. It is by no means the case that personal inclinations lead to mysterious and inconsistent activities; in such a case it is more appropriate to look for difficulties in previous learning experience in order to deal with these educationally and therapeutically.

### **Example: "Kirstin at the Vets":**

Kirstin's first practice assignment took place in accordance with her wish at vets. After two weeks she gave it up. Looking after sick animals was not what she had imagined it to be. For Kirstin the activity triggered off an inner process leading to the decision to work for a taxidermist: she had apparently recognized that a creative activity involving the use of her hands corresponded more to her educational needs than the more indirect, less manifest work with the vet. Her fondness for animals had been the psychologically connecting link.

### **Example: "Kirstin's table":**

When Kirstin later in her educational process, with little previous experience, wanted to make "her" table she was certainly not primarily interested in the expertise of carpentry, but more probably

- in testing her motivation for working with wood,
- in a constructive way of taking leave of her parents,
- in developing her image of herself.

The activity did indeed realize this "personal significance" since Kirstin decided afterwards to become a carpenter.

The personal significance of an activity can be emphasized by offering scope and stimulating activities going beyond the confines of the functionality determined by the respective situations. Young people whose imagination has not been nipped in the bud by the process of socialization, especially the influence of school, tend, as a rule, to be creatively inclined and seek to employ functional activities creatively. They sense that they gain thereby the opportunity to discover themselves, to realize their individuality and thus to develop their own iden-



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tity. Traditional activities of a comparable nature can also offer such opportunities; it is merely necessary that the respective practices permit the young people to employ the instruments at their disposal in the correct manner.

### **Example: "Making a pair of glasses"**

Jenny set herself the task of designing and constructing a pair of sun glasses in line with her personality. The result was a highly original model.

### **Example: "Newspaper publication"**

Karsten used his activity area "newspaper" to make an illustrated report about himself and his practical in the form of a parody of the Berlin magazine "Tip".

### **Example: "Photo exhibition"**

Micky experimented in a photography studio, for want of commercial assignments, and produced on the occasion of a conference of the International Monetary Fund a photo exhibition on the theme "Young People and the Police - How blind people do their duty".

The possibility of giving young people the opportunity for creative experiments depends mainly - alongside the general possibilities for varied activity - on the commercial pressure influencing the situation. The more the profit aspect of the activity dominates the situation, the less chance the young person has to carry out apparently dysfunctional activities; such activities do not fit into the ideology of those involved and cannot be tolerated by them even where an objective possibility exists (no immediate pressure for activity), for they might reactivate their suppressed desire for liberty and creativity. Along with public institutions, large scale state and private service industries (theatre, social institutions, transport authorities etc.), with their own service structure (e.g. hospital workshops) - have scope for those willing to learn because they are not always employed to their full rational capacity.

### **Knowledge/Specialist aspect of learning**

The relationship between a specific school discipline and Productive Learning means that the knowledge serves as an instrument i.e. the young people must be aware of what knowledge and abilities they need in order to become productive. Knowledge is not, as in the traditional school, isolated as an end in itself, but is communicated as the means to an end in "productive activity". The instrumental character of school subjects, science and professionalism, must be rediscovered - science being regarded in the school as a substance pupils have to "inhale", to "eat". Academic knowledge is, as a rule, independent of its practical provenance. Comprehensive academic theories often arise for didactic reasons, they should be easy to communicate and to test, but do not have to prove their practical worth.

In our pragmatic age academic learning is prevalent, and thus the specialist significance of an activity, appears as the dominant one. Productive Learning projects must always justify themselves in relation to a school curriculum. There is a prevailing conviction that systematic academic knowledge is the best qualification for a profession. We do not dispute that aca-



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democratic knowledge can be useful for productive activity; it is taken for granted, however, that academic competence in action derives from the contribution that academic knowledge makes in the areas of definition, scrutiny and solution of activity problems i.e. is chosen and used in an appropriate manner.

### **Example: "Making a table and restoring furniture"**

Kirstin acquired a great deal of knowledge and technical ability from various disciplines in order, starting from the idea of making a table, to arrive at the finished product:

- technical drawing, measurement and arithmetic,
- providing oneself with the necessary material, comparing quality and prices,
- the properties of wood and the differences between various kinds of wood,
- tools and their use,
- material and technique for treating the surface.

During the course of her activity with a furniture restorer she was moreover concerned with

- historical changes in furniture making,
- auctions and the antique trade,
- substances for and techniques of restoration and conservation.

The educational paradigm of Productive Learning, productivity as continuous participation in the process of social development, leads to a new organization of specialist knowledge, whereby the person learning uses this knowledge in an exemplary manner as an instrument of activity (instrumentality of specialist knowledge) and thus develops his /her own personal form of methodical intervention in the field of activity. In the process, complementary aspects of knowledge structures and theoretical forms can contribute to the efficacy of intervention, where the individual can make practical use of them.

In the course of Productive Learning, however, specialist knowledge is more usually employed eclectically. In this way its theoretical approach can be useful in anticipating effects and side effects of the projected activity, in finding alternatives, in reflecting upon the cultural context in order to be able to assess both the efficacy and the cultural implications of the desired activity strategy.

### **Example: "Cat's home"**

Sabine's interest in animals led to her working in an animals' home. When she started, the construction of a new cat's house was being planned. The question posed by Sabine "How should a cat's house be built in order to best satisfy the animals needs?" made it necessary for her to obtain information from many different specialist disciplines (biological information, legal information, architectural information etc.). The main consideration was, however, not of a specialist nature: for Sabine the concept of a "cat's house" had to be determined in accordance with the animals' nature this was by no means a matter of course, but a decision to be taken in the light of a certain ethical and culturally relevant point of view.

### **Example: "Reforestation"**



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A reforestation project for a horticultural school led to a geographical biological theory of Mediterranean vegetation which permitted much more than the autochthonous planning of a landscape area. This theory also revealed what historical processes had led to a change in the vegetation, examined the prospect for reforestation in view of e.g. pollution, the change in sea level, current leisure habits, increasing tourism and how, under certain circumstances, these prospects might be improved.

### The cultural aspect of learning

The word culture is meant to represent general qualities and values of a society extending beyond the particular horizon of a situation, but inherent in that situation. We mean particularly the historical transformation in social relationships. Such qualities pertaining to society as a whole, or also in part ("subcultures") are e.g. language, aesthetics, norms (laws and patterns of behavior), politics and religion. The cultural significance of an activity consists in the extent to which it is typical or untypical, representative, demonstrative, exemplary for an important cultural element in society.

There are of course no universally valid criteria in this respect. Nevertheless it is generally agreed that such themes as "ecology", "the relationship between the sexes", "technological progress", "multicultural society", "sects" or "guaranteeing peace" are culturally important. Such themes should be brought home to young people because education in the sense of participation and subjectivity calls for the development of a position of one's own and forms of personal involvement in the areas we are dealing with, areas of political decision making.

On the other hand a theme can only attain subjective importance, and thereby educational quality, when it finds a place anchored in a person's continuous development. For this reason it is important, as elsewhere in Productive Learning not to prescribe "canonical" themes. It can however be taken for granted that the forms of confrontation with a cultural object e.g. the question of conscientious objection or "alienation" caused by immigration, can be transferred to other themes; and thus, in the case of the biographical relevance of another theme, corresponding abilities (e.g. determining the personal and practical significance of the theme, of the acquisition and processing of information, of the relation to knowledge and activity etc.) can be activated.

The cultural aspect of learning is closely connected with the specialist aspect side of learning. The special knowledge and abilities employed in solving activity problems ought not as recognized by every educational theory worthy of the name to be adopted and employed unthinkingly by Productive Learning, without considering their "side effects and risks". Otherwise those learning forfeit their capacity for judgment, their genuine right to understand their own situations and activities as well as their right to a real participation in the development of their lives as a whole. They should rather be encouraged to think about the quality and the nature of the working processes in which they are involved, as well as the significance of the related conditions, both for the development of their personal identity and for the lives of





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those persons directly involved in the working process, the firm, and, finally, society as a whole.

Moreover the individual's learning and activity are embedded in a changing socio-cultural context. Many different traditions influence this context in a variety of ways and under changing circumstances. If the person learning is aware of those changing circumstances, he/she can make use of them in shaping his/her individual relationship to his/her field of activity: professional activity as a means of earning a living, defining status, process of development, spiritual significance, machinery of suppression and subjugation, ethical duty, destruction of the environment to name a few of the cultural aspects of professional activity.

### Experiences of Productive Learning

In the context of an international project, "Productive Learning in Europe", we were able to gain systematic and intensive experience of the educational form, Productive Learning, in several European countries. These experiences have been extensively documented. Nine so called Euromodules for vocational orientation in accordance with the City as School approach, as well as for vocational training in five different professional fields, reveal the variety of opportunities offered by this educational form, while at the same time showing the difficulties to be overcome.

The traditional nature of vocational training makes it difficult for Productive Learning to spread, or even to establish itself; the educationalists involved are not as yet sufficiently equipped to cope with the new demands and are hampered in their efforts by traditioned attitudes and qualifications. For this reason our Institute for Productive Learning in Europe supports the development of more Productive Learning projects and modules by means of conceptual counseling, supplementing them with further education seminars and study letters which give the educationalists the opportunity to develop and redefine their functions. By now Productive Learning is established in 84 schools all over Germany. On the basis of 20 years experience of Productive Learning, we offer, on an international level, consultation and further educational service for educational institutions wishing to introduce Productive Learning or to develop it further.

cf. A.N. Leontjew, Tätigkeit, Bewußtsein, Persönlichkeit, 1977; cf. also A.N. Leontjew, Probleme der Entwicklung des Psychischen, Frankfurt/M. 1980 (first Russian edition 1959)

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