

## **The Waldorf Contribution to Educational Assessment and Evaluation**

**An Interview with Paul Zachos conducted and written by  
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**Evelien is a visual artist and art researcher. She writes articles and interviews for Seizoener, a contemporary glossy publication that is distributed to roughly 30 Dutch Waldorf schools (primary and secondary).**

**Paul Zachos is director of ACASE (the Association for the Cooperative Advancement of Science and Education), an independent association of scientists and teachers centered in Saratoga Springs, New York. He has been teaching in primary schools (including a Waldorf School), secondary schools and university settings since the 1970s. He served as a researcher, evaluator and planner for the New York State Education Department for 12 years. Dr. Zachos has carried out evaluations of educational programs in public and independent schools and in projects funded by the National Science Foundation and NASA. He has a special interest in scientific and educational creativity. He currently offers practical, interactive, online courses in educational assessment and evaluation.**

**Evelien:**

**Paul, what do you think needs to change in schools, when it comes to assessment? What assessment methods are suitable for Waldorf education, and why?**

Paul:

First, let's be clear about what we mean by *assessment*.

Coherent educational activities have four components: *curriculum* has to do with the setting of learning goals and *instruction* with the methods used to help students attain these goals. *Assessment* is the means by which we find how well students have attained the learning goals. Lastly we can speak of *Evaluation*, which uses assessment results and other sources of information to judge the effectiveness of all of these educational activities so that we can improve them in the future.

We definitely need to know whether students are attaining our learning goals, but a lot of what goes on under the name 'assessment' has nothing to do with supporting teaching and the learning process. For example, there is no educational benefit to knowing how students rank in comparison to other students as is commonly done with tests. This ranking and comparing of students based on their performance can only be used to exercise social control (traditionally by teachers and schools and increasingly by government agencies) and to grant or deny privileges. These are fundamentally **not** educational

activities and cannot really contribute to educational effectiveness. Yet they are deeply lodged in almost all of our educational institutions.

Assessment, or finding out if a student has attained a learning goal is actually quite different from this conventional testing. In assessment one develops ways to carefully observe students in order to determine the extent to which they have attained our (or their) learning goals. It is necessary that we carry out educational assessment — how else would we know if a student is progressing, and how to improve instruction or even the learning goals themselves?

Evaluation presents a different challenge. Evaluation uses the information obtained by assessment (and other information as well) to improve learning by improving the various educational activities we have been discussing. But the information should be used exclusively to help students learn and to take other needed steps to promote their development. All else (e.g. comparing performance and exercising social control) is not of educational value and tends to corrupt the relationship between teacher and learner. Essentially we can say that assessment is about *knowing the learner* and evaluation about *studying educational activities so that we can improve them*.

Evelien:

**Are there ways of assessment that don't corrupt the**

## **learning process of the students?**

Paul:

If carried out properly assessment does not in any way corrupt the learning process of students. For example, my colleagues and I have designed an assessment activity that is enjoyable, motivating, and fosters a direct relationship between the student and natural phenomena. We call this assessment activity **Cubes & Liquids**: [acase.org/cubes-liquids/](http://acase.org/cubes-liquids/). **Cubes & Liquids** gives teachers and students information on the extent of attainment of 6 capabilities that are essential to competent interaction with the modern world. **Cubes & Liquids** takes no time away from teaching, indeed it is itself instruction, because students are practicing the capabilities that are being assessed. So an assessment activity can actually be educational in itself. The information obtained is then used exclusively to help those students who have not yet attained the capabilities and to improve instruction. It is not used to rank and compare students.

**Evelien:**

**How do you see this issue in Waldorf education? Are there assessment methods available specifically suitable for Waldorf schools?**

Paul:

The description above applies to all educational activities, not

just Waldorf education. However, I expect and hope that in time Waldorf education will make increasingly substantial contributions to assessment and evaluation just as it has for almost one hundred years in the areas of curriculum and instruction. As I already mentioned, what has been going on during this same hundred years in assessment and evaluation in the educational mainstream has been non-educational and destructive. So we are at the beginning of a new era, one in which we must approach assessment and evaluation creatively. We must bring renewed intuitions, imagination and techniques to all of our educational endeavors. Already with the use of form drawing and main lesson books as a way to know the learner more deeply, and with child study as a constructive evaluation practice, Waldorf education has begun to make its contribution to these disciplines. These features of Waldorf education give much richer and more appropriate information about the learner and the learning process than conventional tests. But this is only the beginning.