

Swedish Sloyd - What happened after Otto Salomon?

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Many researchers have written about Otto Salomon and how he became “the father” of the school subject Wood and Metal Sloyd in the end of 19th century. Especially has the “Golden Age of Sloyd” from 1880 – 1900 been focused by the researchers. Salomon formulated the philosophy of the “Swedish Pedagogical Sloyd”. It was not only to produce objects, but to support the general development of the mind of the child. Until 1900 Salomon’s Sloyd school in Nääs, Sweden was visited by thousands of teachers, researchers, politicians and government officials from about 40 countries all over the world. His philosophy became well known and a model for similar school subjects in other countries¹ Otto Salomon died 1907, but the teacher education in wood and metal Sloyd at Nääs continued until 1966. This article will discuss what happened with the Sloyd subject during the 100 years between 1919 and 2018.

Swedish school development

In 1919 Sweden got a new national curriculum, the first with a more modern structure². There were two parallel ways of schooling. Most pupils went to compulsory school for six years. At the age of 13 they started to work. The other alternative was called “real school” which was an option for more advanced studies, totally about 8-9 years of schooling. Those who had academic ambitions, could continue for another 3 years in secondary school, all together about 12 years of schooling.

After the end of World War II, there was a new hope for the future and the old school system was abolished. The compulsory school was prolonged to seven or eight years. A new comprehensive nine years compulsory school replaced the old system in 1960ies. This was a way of democratization of the school system. The meaning was that every child should have the same opportunity to receive equal education wherever they lived in Sweden. The intention was to increase the number of young people who could continue to study in secondary schools. Sweden still (2018) have the same basic organization, 3 + 3 years elementary school and 3 years junior high school, a total of 9 years compulsory school.

Sloyd did not become a compulsory school subject until 1955, even if the subject has been frequently taught in the compulsory school system since before 1919. The Sloyd subject is only taught in elementary and lower secondary levels. Sloyd has always been a very popular subject. Every pupil is currently entitled to have 330 x 60 minutes Sloyd teaching distributed from grade 3-9 including textile-, wood- and metalwork.

Sloyd subject content development

When the society changes, also the school subjects have to change and adopt to the current situation. When the compulsory school system was introduced 1962, it was very important to create a balanced content between what is usually called “theoretical” and “practical” subjects. Some of the Scandinavian countries allocated more teaching hours in Sloyd and other “practical subjects” compared to most European countries. From 1969 wood- and metalwork merged with textile work to one subject called Sloyd, taught to both girls and boys in elementary level. Since then there is just ONE syllabus for the Sloyd subject. From grade 7 to 9 the pupils could make their own choice between either textile work or wood- and metal work.

In Sweden there is a national curriculum which prescribes what is the aim, content and syllabus for every subject. From 1980 and onwards the national curriculum gradually became a political directed document rather than a pedagogical text. Experienced Sloyd teachers, teacher educators and Sloyd researchers were engaged in writing the text of the Sloyd subject content, but in the end the Ministry of Education edited the text in order to fit the political ideas. The Sloyd classrooms have looked more or

less the same over the years and the Sloyd teachers, have taught their students to handle tools and material, using a number of techniques as they always have done, BUT the focus in their teaching has been changing according to the official steering documents.

The object in focus

From the time of Otto Salomon the focus of the subject was to make certain objects in a specific order, starting with objects which were very simple, then continuing to practice gradually more advanced techniques. Every object should be usable in the household.

After World War II, more modern ideas, like recognizing the child's own interests, influenced the choice of objects. It became popular to make toys or other objects which the children could use by themselves. Still the progression from the simple to the more complicated work was the main principle. The first national curriculum for the comprehensive school was published in 1960 and was used in schools since 1962.³

The technique in focus

In the curriculum from 1969⁴ and 1980⁵ no objects were mentioned in the Sloyd content. Instead of telling what object to make, the techniques the teachers should teach were prescribed. That meant that every teacher got more power to decide what to do, and how they could spend the allocated time shared by different techniques. The pupils were also asked to make their own choice about what object to make, as long as they learned the prescribed techniques.

The process in focus

In 1994 there was a new goal-oriented curriculum⁶. Neither objects, nor techniques were mentioned in the subject content. Instead there were *goals to aim for*, like: "the student should strive for to strengthen her/his self-confidence to independently solve problems within the Sloyd subject field and practice to increase her/his ability to work with different Sloyd techniques and methods". There were also a number of *goals to attain* like: "the student should manage to independently create ideas for sloyd objects to make in different materials and be able to present the ideas verbally or visually on paper or on the computer." In this curriculum the creating process was strengthened. The concept *The Sloyd Process* was invented and defined by Thorsten Lundberg, who was a teacher in Art, and worked at Nääs 1955 -1959. Lundberg became the first director of the new Wood- and Metal teacher education in Linköping which started 1961 and replaced the courses at Nääs. He wanted to introduce a new teaching methodology in Sloyd and called the working method in Nääs "imitating". Instead he was a spokesman for the "constructive" method where the pupil should be involved in the whole process, from the first idea to the handmade object in the end. Already in 1972 Lundberg defined the process in three stages: planning, making, evaluation⁷. In the syllabus for 1994 there were four stages: ideas, planning, making and evaluation. This was in reality a strong reaction against the Nääs system, where the pupils were told by the teachers what object to make. In the Nääs system it was the teacher who decided if the object could pass as acceptable or not. In the Lundberg system the pupil should be involved in every stage of the process. This system was based on a continuing dialogue between the pupil and the teacher. A problem occurred in connection with 1994 curriculum because a new system of assessing was introduced at the same time. Sloyd teachers were used to give grades depending on the quality of the work with tools and techniques, but now they were supposed to evaluate different stages of the Sloyd process and assess pupils' development.

Another National curriculum was introduced in 2000⁸. In this version the word process was mentioned 15 times within three pages describing the aim and content of the Sloyd subject⁹. According to the goals the pupil should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school, it says (in shortened form): "the pupil should be able to: present ideas, plan their tasks, choose material, colour, form ..., be able to work in accordance with different instructions, choose appropriate working methods, handle tools and instruments ..., be able to take initiative and personal responsibility in the Sloyd Process, be able to describe the Sloyd process, give reasons of the choices that they have made ... as well as be able to

evaluate their work.” This text could be used in many situations but does not say anything special about Sloyd knowledge. As long as they have been working according to the stages in the process, they could have attained all necessary abilities to get high scores. The process had at that time totally overruled the importance of the product in the Sloyd education.

The knowledge in focus

The current curriculum (2018) and subject syllabuses came 2011¹⁰. The critiques based on the previous text as being very vague was the point of departure for the instructions to the new authors. This curriculum was knowledge based. The syllabuses were supposed to be crystal clear and the assessments should be compatible within and between subjects. The main subject content was divided into four main groups: *The material, tools and techniques of Sloyd*, *The working processes in Sloyd*, *The cultural and aesthetic forms of expression in Sloyd*, *Sloyd in the society*. This syllabus is much clearer. The “Central subject content” tells what content is the main issue for different age groups. Unfortunately, the language is very bureaucratic, it sometimes confuses the reader. The instructions contain criteria for the scores from A (the highest) B, C, D to E (lowest) F means fail/insufficient. The same vocabulary is used for all subjects to show the progression of knowledge. For A is *well developed* and *well performed with own initiatives* the value words, for C *a developed* and *relatively well performed with developed motivations* the words to use to evaluate and for E *simple and partly functioning, sometimes with support* the characteristics for the level of knowledge. The text has become ambiguous, in spite of the ambitions to write an easily understandable syllabus. It does not fit to the vocabulary of each subject. The Sloyd teachers have to make their own interpretations and the compatibility and equality of the assessment does not become better than before.

Conclusion

What has happened to the Sloyd subject after Otto Salomon died? The School subject Sloyd is still taught as compulsory subject to ALL Swedish pupils from grade 3 – 9, usually 60-90 minutes per week. In the 1960ies there was severe critic against the old-fashioned and undemocratic way of teaching Sloyd according to the Nääs system. Contradictory the very visible working in the workshops and the concrete result, shadowed the philosophy behind the manual work. People did see the objects, but it was only the craftsmen themselves and the pupils who had to struggle to learn from their teachers and from their own experiences, who could understand that it takes a lot of thinking to learn how to make any sloyd object.

The Sloyd subject content knowledge has always been based on hands-on experience and of lot practise, just as Otto Salomon explained. While the young people work, they train their problem solving, their endurance, their brain, eyes and hands in a very special combination which can never be learned by reading a book. This is as important today as before, when the computers and keyboards create a distance between knowledge ABOUT how to make things and knowledge IN how to make things and how to take care of materials in a sustainable society.

During the last 50 years, lot of changes has been done in the description of the Sloyd subject because of the school reforms and the curriculum and syllabus changes.¹¹ Salomon’s name is not mentioned any longer, but his methods, working with every individual pupil taking the time needed is by far the best way to learn. To follow his principles and start with small simple objects and not take too big steps until the knowledge has settled is recommendable even today. The other principles to work from plainness to complexity, from the known to the unknown and from concrete to abstract is by far much easier to understand and to follow than the bureaucratic document which is the current syllabus in Sloyd.

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¹ Thorbjörnsson, Hans (1990). *Nääs och Otto Salomon, slöjden och leken*. OrdBildarna

² Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor 1919. Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlaget.

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⁶ Utbildningsdepartementet (1994). *Läroplaner för det obligatoriska undervisningsväsendet och de frivilliga skolreformerna, Lpo94 Lpf 94*. Stockholm: Liber.

⁷ Borg, Kajsa (2001) *Slöjdämnet, intryck-uttryck-avtryck*. [Diss.] Linköpings universitet, Institutionen för pedagogik och psykologi.

⁸ National Agency for Education (2001). *Syllabuses for the compulsory school 2000*. Stockholm: Fritzes.

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¹⁰ Skolverket (2011) Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2011. Stockholm: Fritzes.

¹¹ 1962, 1969, 1980, 1994, 2000 and 2011.