

Sloyd ...an approach to Craft Education

The founder of this philosophy & indeed practice was Otto Salomon [1849 – 1907] born in Gothenburg, Sweden to wealthy Jewish parents. A Grammar school education was followed by periods at the Technological Institute, Stockholm, & Ultuna Agricultural Institute in Uppsala. Salomon`s wealthy uncle, August Abrahamson, owned a large estate & country house, known as Naas, near Gothenburg where Salomon assisted with the estate management & soon opened an evening school for farm workers at Naas. Country folk & farmers, certainly up until the end of the 19th century spent free time [if any!] weaving, spinning or producing hammer handles, tables, spoons, rakes etc. This was a domestic activity, known as home *crafts* or *handicraft* & provided a valuable source of additional income during the winter months.

The term *Slojd* or Sloyd as used by Salomon has its origins in the old Scandinavian word *slog* which means

`handy. Sloyd means `craft` or `manual skill`

Contemporary Swedish attitudes towards elementary schooling for children were for reform. Many educators felt that school children should be given the opportunity to undertake practical as well as academic work. It was felt a `hands on` approach would provide a more balanced education & benefit children educationally, physically & morally. Salomon regarded the academic teaching by `rote`, which was widespread in primary schools as encouraging negative attitudes towards fellow pupils & school in general. His approach was that children have a natural desire for both knowledge & activity & their needs would & should be met when manual work was introduced alongside the conventional school curriculum.

In 1872 Salomon & Abrahamson opened Naas as a vocational school for boys, a girl's school in 1874 followed by a dedicated school for training Sloyd teachers in 1875

At Naas Salomon drew up a syllabus for an educational Arts & Crafts type course with particular reference to woodwork. He had done comparative studies between metalwork, basket –making, straw – plaiting, book –binding etc, & woodwork. The conclusion being that woodwork was the most suitable craft to be taught to boys & girls from ages 11 to 14. This course consisted of the fundamental principles of manual & physical education & especially the need for accuracy & integrity in the work. Salomon`s aim was for the development of the pupil, set beyond the desire for the accurate production of any given article. Emphasis was placed on the appreciation of design; creativity & Salomon encouraged the freedom of choice amongst his pupils. Salomon drew a distinction between material & formative education. The former could be acquired by knowledge & skills learned during a typical school lesson. The latter implies developing mental & physical powers with the pupil receiving instruction in a utilitarian way. Salomon`s idea was that the competence of profound knowledge was far more important than learning vast amounts of facts & figures.

Development implied the child was capable of solving problems at higher & more complex levels. If he or she only learns large quantities of facts he or she will be left with the same level of skill as before. Consequently he reduced the number of subjects taught at Naas, & coined the expression `concentration of teaching`.

‘Education, cultivation of the mind, means what is left when we have forgotten what we learned at school’

Otto Salomon, Pedagogiska fragor [Educational Questions], 1905

Salomon realised that a *method* was the only possible way forward. The pupil would work through all the stages in a logical & methodical *exercise* needed to complete the activity or *model* [his term for an item of woodwork] some of these exercises can be seen in **Fig.1**

Each pupil had to learn the exercises in a progressive order, easy to difficult, simple to complex & from the known to the unknown. Pupils were allowed to work at their own speed & received instruction as & when required. Otto Salomon was convinced that pupils should not be working on individual projects or models simultaneously. This would surely lead to distraction! Interestingly for us today was the fact that the knife was the first tool to be used by the children. The use of sandpaper was discouraged & the children were provided with full size tools.

Teachers were expected to deliver the right amount of teaching, not too much, nor too little. A special feature of this novel approach was the deliberate exclusion of preliminary exercises. The pupil began at once to make a ‘real’ piece of work. Salomon discouraged embellishment or ornament in the models. He maintained that plain & simple lines should be accomplished before anything else.

The following three stages were adopted by teachers to develop self-reliance in the pupils:

1. Both teacher & pupil should check the early work. The teacher instructing on the standard of accuracy, neatness, & precision needed for the task.
2. The pupil should now be able to measure the components for themselves.
3. The pupil should be able to carry out the whole task.

‘If we do not teach handicrafts individually, it is not a means of education in its truest sense, since it has not been based on the nature of the child; & unless handicrafts be so based, they will soon lose their potent educational character.’

Otto Salomon, The Theory of Educational Sloyd, 1892.

Other subjects were taught at Naas, but seven hours out of ten [a long day!] were given to some type of Sloyd: carving, leather work, carpentry for the boys, weaving, cookery & sewing for the girls.

‘if practical manual work is introduced, the matter is changed, for who are dull when the head works without the hand, excel when the use of the hand is required as well as that of the head, as in handicrafts. Children who are naturally skilful & dexterous when hand & head work together, although slow when the head works alone, have often more self respect after discovering their power & skill; & if only one in 500 be so affected, even then the course would be worth introducing’

Otto Salomon, The Theory of Educational Sloyd, 1892.

Although lacking formal training Salomon decided to concentrate on the teacher training aspects of the school, which became known as *pedagogisk Sloyd* or educational Sloyd. He devised a system of aims that were to be adhered to & included the following:

1. Instil a taste for & appreciation of work.
2. Create a respect for hard, honest labour.
3. Develop independence & self-reliance.
4. Provide training in accuracy & neatness.
5. Train the eye & appreciate the sense of beauty in form.
6. Develop the sense of touch.
7. Develop patience & attention.
8. Acquire tool skills.
9. Produce precise & useful products.

In 1882 the demand for Sloyd teachers had increased & Naas became the first institution to provide teacher training, initially for artist / crafts persons to become Sloyd teachers. Salomon later designed a scheme where serving qualified teachers could study to attain Sloyd teaching skills in practical & academic subjects.

Education consists of the development of the powers & capabilities, psychical & physical, which have been given to man The best educated man is he who has the greatest possible range of these powers, but especially the most essential & important among them, harmoniously developed to their utmost extent.

Otto Salomon to the National Union of Teachers London, 1890.

Abrahamson & Salomon worked energetically to spread the Naas Sloyd system to other countries. Salomon published many books advocating the Sloyd system that were widely translated. Both men could speak & write in English, German & French & travelled abroad for one or two months every year. Abrahamson fortunately had the financial resources & international contacts to ease the way

Such was the demand for Sloyd teachers that between 1880 & 1907 further education over 4,000 Swedish teachers & 1,500 teachers had attended courses at Naas from 40 countries. In the period 1885 – 1914 over 700 British attended games or courses at Naas. Each course lasted for 6 weeks & 4 courses were run per year. Typically 6 or 7 hours were spent on practical work with 1 or 2 hours of theory or discussions. Spare time was spent folk dancing, walking, games & singing.

The first English teachers to be trained arrived at Naas in 1884, both women from the London School Board. In 1887 the first English school master arrived from the same institution. In 1889 the Union Of Sloyd Teachers of England was founded & held its first AGM in London

A Directory of 1893 lists 137 Sloyd classes, which could be attended in the UK. Interestingly [well I think so!] *14 of them are within a 15-mile radius of the fair city of Cambridge!* These mixed & single sexed institutions range from public, national & girls high / grammar schools, to colleges.

In 1888 Abrahamson & Salomon began to send models [woodwork] made at Naas abroad to schools in Germany, Switzerland, Brazil, & later the UK & USA. Supported by all Swedish embassies across Europe teachers, civil servants & politicians alike were invited to visit Naas. In the Great World Exhibitions of Philadelphia 1876, Paris 1878 & 1900, Chicago 1893 & St. Louis 1904 Naas had a showcase of its own. By 1907, the year Salomon, 58, died, representatives of over 40 nations had visited Naas.

In 1912. Rurik Holm was appointed Principal & Gunnar Nilsson Head Teacher & they set about reforming the curriculum at Naas. The original Naas system as directed by Salomon had begun to fall out of favour & this marked its decline in influence. It was criticised in Sweden & overseas for its rigid teaching & simple design content of its woodwork. Fierce debate ensued in the newspapers from arts & crafts teachers with many disillusioned with Naas Sloyd teaching. Many were calling for creativity to be encouraged, co-ordination in manual training & art, & individual project work for children.

Naas continued to play an important role, indeed up until 1966 all Swedish teachers of wood & metalwork received their training there. In the UK up until 1900 there was a strong movement for Sloyd in primary education but what happened after that? I do not know. Could it have been swallowed up & incorporated to a much lesser degree by the then emerging City & Guilds Board?

My thanks go to Bruce for his co-operation & please look out for his in- depth article on Sloyd in Regional Furniture Society magazine at a later date.

Regards,