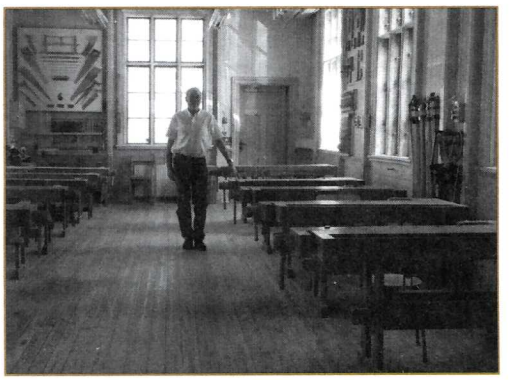
Sloyd, Wood Shop, and Formative Education



Doug Stowe stands in a Sloyd classroom in Sweden.

"Let the youth once learn to take a straight shaving off a plank, or draw a fine curve without faltering, or lay a brick level in its mortar, and he has learned a multitude of other matters which no lips of man could ever teach him."

John Ruskin,
Time and Tide,
1883

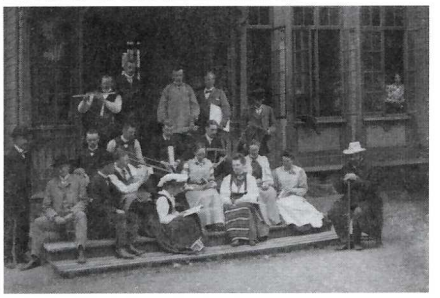
Some of us in the early part of this century were left wondering, "what happened to woodworking in schools?" and of course what happened as woodworking education fell into decline is very closely related to what happened in the earliest days of woodworking education. The present is key to the past, and vice-versa.

In 2001, I started a new K-12th grade woodworking program in a small independent school in Arkansas and visited North Bennet Street School while on a brief tour of other school programs. "Have you heard about Sloyd," they asked, and that question launched my research that led to a number of articles published by Woodwork Magazine and which are now available on the American Woodworker website, *www.americanwoodworker.com* (type sloyd in the search box). While my own woodworking program, Wisdom of the Hands, is not based exclusively on Sloyd, and we make no pretense of following the system as it was taught in the 19th century, there are reasons why modern furniture craftsmen should be particularly interested in Educational Sloyd and what it teaches us about the educational value of woodworking programs in today's schools.

Otto Salomon, founder of the Sloyd teacher training school at Nääs, Sweden taught that Sloyd had two particular values in education, economic and formative. Economic education involves preparing a student to do a specific task or to learn a specific skill that can provide monetary return to the student and his or her community. Formative education involves the development of character, strength, curiosity, resilience, intellectual capacity and understanding that prepares the student for a meaningful life. Any manual training teacher in the US sees those kinds of development of character happening in his or her students regardless of whether they are practicing Sloyd, but an important distinction is made in who receives the training, and who does not.

In 1937 Charles A. Bennett published his final volume of his two-part set *History of Manual and Industrial Education* and it is a wonderful resource for those curious about the early days of manual training. His first volume covers the time up to 1870, and the second volume the period from 1870 to 1917. It might seem curious that a thoroughly researched and comprehensive volume published in 1937 would be deliberately ended in 1917. Bennett explained that he ended his history on that date because that was the date of the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act which provided federal funds to certain programs of manual training and effectively ended what had been a lively and long running debate over whether manual training would be offered only to those destined for industrial employment or whether it and its formative values would be provided to all children of all social classes as proposed by Otto Salomon and the proponents of Educational Sloyd. President Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Hughes act into law as it conformed to an opinion he expressed while President of Princeton University:

"We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks."



Students and teachers of the Sloyd program in the late 1880's.

And so, a system of education was established that was intended to isolate those who worked with their heads and hands from those who worked with their heads alone.

Of particular interest to today's craftsmen is Sloyd's emphasis on the dignity and value of all labor as described by Salomon in *The Theory of Educational Sloyd*:

"...persons not manually trained, generally regard the products of manual labour at less than their real value. They think it much more difficult to solve a mathematical problem than to make a table. It is not an easy thing to make a parcel-pin or a pen-holder with accuracy, and when students have done these things they will be the better able to estimate comparatively the difficulty of making a table or chair; and what perhaps is of still greater importance, they will become qualified to decide between what is good and what is bad work, and thus avoid the misfortunes which befall the ignorant and credulous through the impositions of knaves."

As a nation, we lost our sense of the value of manual training in schools as we ceased to be primarily a manufacturing and agricultural economy. Our understanding of its value was based on what Salomon called "economic values." The clear and widespread understanding of its other, formative values was put aside many years ago along with the passage of the Smith-Hughes and the decline of Educational Sloyd. So, how do we restore what has been lost? The first step is to recognize that work with the hands, with tools, crafting things from wood and other materials is essential to the development of all children regardless of social class and educational aspirations. From that understanding, we can begin to take matters in our own hands.

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