

A Brief Philosophy of Preparation

By Carlo Willmann, Vienna; ITEF meeting on September 16, 2026

Introduction – Anthropological Aspects: The Experience of Time

I have a dog. When he wants to go outside, he stands at the door. When he's hungry, he stands in front of his empty bowl.

He wants to go for a walk, do his business, and have something to eat. Does he prepare for this? No, I'm the one who prepares everything: I get the leash, check to make sure I have everything I need, I get the food, think about what he should have right now—whether I bought it beforehand or sometimes even cooked something for him myself. My dog does absolutely nothing; he doesn't need to. Could he even do it—could he prepare something, think about what's needed for a walk or for his food?

I don't think so, and why not? My dog is a creature that lives more or less in the present. I can prepare things because I consciously live in the present. I can reflect on my past, assess my present, and plan ahead for my future. He wants to go out now; he wants to eat now. Sure, he has a past and a future, but he doesn't have the awareness of them that I do. (You might object: Squirrels stockpile food for the winter. But: they all do it the same way. They can't do otherwise—just like the birds that build their nests. In general, animals don't make preparations; they act according to their innate nature.

Only humans can make preparations; it is a distinctive characteristic of humanity. This is because humans are beings of time. And with the topic of time, we touch on an important issue: time management. It is the first element we must address with the students: A good sense of time and effective time management provide a solid foundation for any kind of preparation.

The Essence of Preparation

For what does preparation mean? It means taking action—so that things will be ready at a later time, accessible, available, and usable. This is the goal, and this is also the essence of preparation. To bring something into being that would not be realized without preparation. In German, we have the beautiful word “Vorhaben”—I have something in mind, but it is not yet within my grasp. Wanting to create or achieve something that I cannot yet accomplish is the reason for all preparation. Between my plan and its realization lies the period of preparation.

During this period, I must go through certain phases dictated by my goal itself.

Example: Sports

Athletes provide us with a clear example. A professional athlete needs a very complex, time-oriented preparation plan to succeed. This is reflected in his training schedule: He wants to

compete in the Olympic Games and perhaps even win. Years of training are required, along with the precise coordination of many parameters determined by an entire training team (coaches, physical therapists, sports medicine specialists, massage therapists, and mental coaches). Nutrition, medical care, and training routines that neither under- nor, certainly not, overtax them, along with mental training designed to help them persevere through training and master the competition. And: The entire preparation process builds up to a specific moment—the decisive day of the competition—when all of their physical and mental strength must be optimally available at precisely the right moment to make the long-awaited success possible.

Preparation as an Exercise in Self-Awareness

To manage my time effectively, I need another skill: good SELF-AWARENESS and an assessment of my own abilities. If I set out to play a Beethoven piano sonata, I must first and foremost know myself: where I stand in terms of my skill level, what I'm currently capable of—my starting point determines how I can approach my goal, and it also shows me which sonata to choose. One shouldn't overestimate oneself and underestimate the sonata. This is an important process, especially for teachers, to avoid ending up disappointed and frustrated.

Preparation as a Learning Process

Once I have a reasonably clear understanding of this, a third prerequisite for achieving my goal emerges: THE MOTIVATION TO LEARN. What do I need to learn in order to succeed in my endeavor? Preparation essentially means: LEARNING. When we prepare for a seminar, we must see ourselves as LEARNERS. Good preparation is a learning process in which we can discover new things, but it's also a learning process for and about ourselves, where we can get to know ourselves in new ways.

Preparation as a Process of Internalization

This learning process—this process of preparation—can be divided into various phases.

In the spirit of Goethe, we can summarize this with the well-known formula: Gathering – Organizing – Developing – Presenting

Let us focus here, above all, on the topic of gathering. Gathering means acquiring knowledge about the subject at hand; it is important in that it teaches us to become familiar with and connect to the object of our preparation. Only when we are truly connected to a subject can we truly grasp it; only then do we know how to organize and ultimately present it.

This is indeed a real question today in the age of AI. There are excellent preparation tools available to teachers that present a lesson plan to me in a matter of seconds, well-structured in terms of both content and pedagogy. While the material is well-structured, the teachers themselves are not prepared—that is, they are not connected to the subject matter; they have not become learners themselves.

This connection also gives us joy in the endeavor itself. Ultimately, it is not the individual items we have discovered through collecting that matter, but rather the joy in the whole of what we have collected. Without this connection to the objects, this joy cannot arise. I could also say that the love for the subjects we wish to convey—whether in college or in school—cannot grow, and then we cannot be persuasive either.

Goethe called this “collecting with a plan and purpose,” but he also warned against allowing “pedantry” to arise “from all order,” which one must then rid oneself of. We could also say that we need a dynamic, flexible structure from which we can, in turn, discover new things and allow them to emerge. Only with such a flexible structure—one that avoids pedantry on the one hand and superficiality on the other—can we create a vibrant classroom experience that engages both ourselves and others, whether they are college students or high school students.

Learning to Ask Questions

I’d like to address one more point that seems increasingly important to me.

Humans’ unique ability to prepare for something is matched by their unique ability to ask questions. This is of crucial importance, especially in education. Once I’ve learned to ask questions myself and discovered how important good questions are, I’ll make sure that my students also learn to ask good questions. The more I let my preparation be guided by questions, the more I receive not only—hopefully—coherent answers, but also a sense of the significance and diversity of a topic. Unfortunately, school is still very answer-oriented. Students are asked questions and are expected to give answers—that’s fine. But the crucial point is: are these really the students’ own questions? Answers to questions we’ve asked ourselves have a greater impact on us; they’re much more effective, perceived as more relevant, and absorbed more deeply than answers to questions we haven’t asked ourselves. So, if we challenge ourselves with questions as we prepare our lessons, we can also see what the students’ questions might be. And then we can make sure they have the space they need to ask their questions. Asking questions makes people more self-confident, freer, and more secure. And that also makes the classroom more lively—the more questions students learn to ask, the easier my preparation becomes. The students themselves become a valuable resource for my own teaching.

I said that questions deepen my engagement with the subject and foster my internalization of it. And it is only from this that what we need most urgently can actually emerge: intuition. The right questions help us find the right tone—harmonious, spontaneous reactions, humor, lightness, and joy in teaching. From this, we can develop a new relationship to the subjects, a new relationship to ourselves, and thus also to the students. And the students themselves learn and are capable of doing this. All of life is development and encounter, as Steiner and Martin Buber would say.

These steps—knowing and observing oneself, connecting inwardly with the subject, appreciating the diversity of a subject and discovering its inner order, keeping it alive through questions, and gaining insights for teaching from them—are the important aspects of preparation. To be able to prepare means to enable development and create encounters.

An Important Remark by Rudolf Steiner

I'd also like to mention a passage by Rudolf Steiner regarding lesson preparation that has particularly struck me. He speaks about religious education. And some of you know that I deal with questions of religion and religious education. And there is a very profound statement by Steiner:

Regarding the teacher's preparation for religious education, he says:

"Preparation is essential, and so is the right mood." (2019, GA 300b, p. 24) And further: "If, while preparing [the lesson], one feels a natural, devout mood, then this religious education will also have an effect on the child. If one does not develop this devout mood, then not much will come of religious education as far as the child is concerned." (1986, GA 301 p. 41).

Even during preparation, we need the spiritual atmosphere necessary to reach the child in his or her spirituality. Without this sensitivity in the preparation, Steiner believed that the lesson itself would not succeed. For Steiner, preparation means more than just a repertoire of techniques. It means an attitude—the very attitude required for teaching. It is of great value in and of itself, without our having to focus on a specific outcome. One could also say that if I am grateful for my ability to prepare something, and if I love what I do in this process and the things associated with it, and find joy in them, then I can bring this love and this joy into the classroom. I believe this is what Steiner meant by preparation when he spoke of a devout atmosphere, as he does here in reference to religious education.