

Greetings to the Reader

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Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Written in the mid-seventeenth century by the Moravian bishop who lost wife, children, home, and country to the Thirty Years' War, these prefatory pages open the Great Didactic, the founding document of modern pedagogy, from which later traditions of universal education and graded schooling descend. Comenius proposes nothing less than an art of teaching all things to all people, grounded not in patchwork experience but in the nature of things themselves, and offered as a remedy for the disorder he saw consuming Christendom. The tone is at once practical and visionary: a reformer addressing teachers, parents, and magistrates with the conviction that schooling rightly ordered is inseparable from piety rightly formed. Expect an argumentative and programmatic reading, written with the gravity of a man who believed education might yet repair a broken world.

Let the main object of this, our Didactic, be as follows :

To seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more ; by which schools may be the scene of less noise, aversion, and useless labour, but of more leisure, enjoyment, and solid progress; and through which the Christian community may have less darkness, perplexity, and dissension, but on the other hand more light, orderliness, peace, and rest.

God be merciful unto us and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us ; >That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Psalm 67: 1, 2

Greetings to the reader

- Didactic signifies the art of teaching. Several men of ability, taking pity on the Sisyphean-labour of schools, have lately endeavoured to find out some such Art, but with unequal skill and unequal success.
- Some merely wished to give assistance towards learning some language or other with greater ease. Others found ways of imparting this or that science or art with greater speed. Others suggested improvements of various kinds; but almost all proceeded by means of unconnected precepts, gleaned from a superficial experience, that is to say, *a posteriori*.
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We venture to promise a Great Didactic, that is to say, the whole art of teaching all things to all men, and indeed of teaching them with certainty, so that the result cannot fail to follow; further, of teaching them pleasantly, that is to say, without annoyance or aversion on the part of teacher or pupil, but rather with the greatest enjoyment for both; further of teaching them thoroughly, not superficially and showily, but in such a manner as to lead to true knowledge, to gentle morals, and to the deepest piety. Lastly, we wish to prove all this *a priori*, that is to say, from the unalterable nature of the matter itself, drawing off, as from a living source, the constantly flowing runlets, and bringing them together again into one concentrated stream, that we may lay the foundations of the universal art of founding universal schools.

- The prospect which is here held out is indeed great and very desirable, though I can easily foresee that to many it will appear to be an idle dream rather than the exposition of a real possibility.

In the meantime let each one, whoever he may be, withhold his judgment until he knows the true nature of my proposition. He will then be at liberty not only to form his judgment, but also to make it public. For I cannot wish, and much less can I claim, to hurry along any one by persuasion so that he give his approval to an insufficiently established proposition; but rather desire that each observer should naturally bring to bear on the matter his own, and indeed his keenest senses (which should be dulled by no deceits of the imagination). This it is that I most earnestly demand and entreat.

- The matter is indeed a serious one, and, as all should earnestly wish for the result, so should all, with united effort, carefully pass judgment on the means, since the salvation of the human race is at stake.

What better or what greater service could we perform for the state than to instruct and to educate the young? Especially at the present time and in the present condition of morals, when they have sunk so low that, as Cicero says, all should join to bridle them and keep them in check. It was Philip Melancthon who remarked that to educate the young well was a greater feat than to sack Troy; and in this connection we may note the saying of Gregory Nazianzen: "To educate man is the art of arts, for he is the most complex and the most mysterious of all creatures."

- Now to portray the art of arts is a troublesome matter, and calls for exceptional criticism; and not that of one man alone, but of many; since no individual is so keen-sighted that the greater part of any matter does not escape his observation.
- With justice therefore I demand from my readers, and adjure all who shall see this undertaking, by the salvation of mankind: firstly, not to attribute it to indiscretion if any one resolve not only to investigate so weighty a matter, but also to give promises; since this can only have the advantage of others as its object. Secondly, not to lose heart at once, if the first attempt do not succeed on the spot, and the longed-for result be not brought to full completion by us. For in any matter it is necessary that the seed should first sprout, and then raise itself gradually.

However incomplete, therefore, our essay may be, and however much it fall short of the goal at which we aim, the investigation itself will prove that it has reached a higher stage, and one lying nearer the goal than hitherto. Finally, I ask my readers to bring with them to their criticism as much attention and keenness as is befitting in matters of the greatest importance. It will be my first step to touch briefly

on the circumstances that led to this essay and to enumerate the chief points that present any novelty; I can then with full confidence entrust the one to my reader's candour, the other to his further research.

- This art of teaching and of learning was in former centuries to a great extent unknown, at any rate in that degree of perfection to which it is now wished to raise it, and on that account the world of culture and the schools were so full of toil and weariness, of weakness and deceits, that only those who were gifted with parts beyond the ordinary could obtain a sound education.
- But recently it has pleased God to let the morning glow of a newly-rising age appear, in which He has inspired some sturdy men in Germany, who, weary of the errors of the present method of instruction, began to think out an easier and shorter way of teaching languages. This they did, the one after the other, and therefore some with greater, others with less success, as may be seen in the didactic works that they gave to the world.
- I here allude to men like Ratke, Lubin, Helwig, Ritter, Bodin, Glaum, Vogel, Wolfstirn, and he who deserves to be placed before them all, John Valentine Andreae (who in his golden writings has laid bare the diseases not only of the Church and the state, but also of the schools, and has pointed out the remedies). In France too they set this stone in motion, since, in the year 1629, Janus Caecilius Frey brought out a fine work on Didactic (under the title, *A new and easy way to the goodly Sciences and Arts, to Languages, and to Rhetoric*).
- It is almost incredible what pleasure I found, and how my pain over the decline of my native land and the terribly oppressed state of all Germany was lightened whenever opportunity arose and I turned over the pages of these writings. For I began to hope that it was not without purpose that the providence of the Almighty had allowed it to come to pass that the decline of the old schools and the foundation of new ones in harmony with new ideas should take place at one and the same time. For he who intends to raise a new building, invariably levels the ground beforehand and removes the less comfortable or ruined houses.
- This thought raised in me a joyful hope mingled with pleasant emotion; but I soon felt this vanish, and reflected that it would be impossible to reconstruct such an important institution from the very beginning.
- As I wished for instruction on some points, and on others wished, myself, to instruct my fellows, I applied by letter first to one then to another of the above-mentioned writers. In vain, however, partly because some guarded their ideas with great care, partly because the letters did not reach those to whom they were directed, and therefore remained unanswered.
- Only one of them (the renowned J. V. Andreae) sent the friendly answer that he wished to be of some assistance, and urged me to proceed with my efforts. Stimulated by this, my spirit began to take more daring flights, till at last my unbounded solicitude for the public good led me to take the matter thoroughly in hand.
- So, putting on one side the discoveries, thoughts, observations, and admonitions of others, I began myself to investigate the matter thoughtfully and to seek out the causes, the principles, the methods, and the objects of the art of teaching (*discentia* as they may be called after Tertullian).
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This was the origin of my treatise, which, as I trust, develops the subject more thoroughly than has hitherto been done. It was first composed in my mother tongue for the use of my people, and afterwards on the advice of several men of standing translated into Latin, in order that, if possible, it might be of universal use.

- For, as Lubin says in his Didactic, Charity bids us not to niggardly withhold from mankind what God has intended for the use of all, but to throw it open to the whole world. For it is the nature of all true possessions that they can be shared by all; and that they advantage all more and more in proportion as they are shared by greater numbers.
 - It is also a law of human existence that if any know of assistance lying close at hand to those who are struggling he should not withhold it from them; especially in a case, as in the one before us, where the matter concerns not one but many, and not individuals merely but towns, provinces, kingdoms, and in short the whole human race.
 - Should there be any man who is such a pedant as to think that the reform of schools has nothing to do with the vocation of a Theologian, let him know that I was myself thoroughly penetrated with this idea. But I have found that the only way in which I can be freed from it is to follow God's call, and without digression to devote myself to that work to which the divine impulse directs me.
 - Christian readers, suffer me to speak with you confidentially! My more intimate friends know that I am a man of little ability and almost without literary training, but that, nevertheless, I lament the defects of the age, and make great endeavours to remedy these in any way that is possible, whether by means of my own discoveries or those of others (though this can only take place by the grace of God).
 - Therefore, if anything should find favour, it is not my work but His who is wont to win praise from the mouths of children, and who in order to prove Himself faithful, earnest, and benign, gives to those who ask, opens to those who knock, and grants Himself to those who seek Him (Luke xi.), and whose good gifts to us we ought to pass on ungrudgingly to others. As my Saviour knows, my heart is so simple that it makes no difference to me whether I teach or am taught, whether I exhort or am exhorted, whether I am the teacher of teachers, or the scholar of scholars.
 - And so, what the Lord permits me to observe, that give I forth for public use and as common property.
 - If any find anything better, let him follow my example, lest, having buried his talent in a napkin, he be accused of wantonness by our Lord, who wills that His servants put out to usury so that the talent which is given to each may win another talent (Luke xix.).
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To seek what is great is noble, was ever noble, and ever will be noble. What thou hast begun with God cannot remain without result.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

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