

The Use of the Art of Teaching

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Essay

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INTRODUCTION

A chapter from the *Didactica Magna*, written in Latin during the 1630s by a Moravian bishop of the Unity of the Brethren who spent most of his adult life in exile after Habsburg armies destroyed his community, his library, and his manuscripts. Comenius argued, against the prevailing assumption that learning required suffering, that a properly ordered method could make schools into "places of amusement," and his vision of universal education laid the groundwork for modern pedagogy, from Pestalozzi through the common school movement. The seven-fold scheme presented here moves outward from parents to heaven itself, treating the reform of teaching as continuous with the reform of the Church and the salvation of souls. Expect a confident, system-building argument written by a man who believed pedagogy was a branch of theology.

That the art of teaching be placed on a proper foundation is to the advantage."

- Of **parents**, who up to this time have for the most part been uncertain how much to expect from their children. They hired tutors, besought them, strove to win them over by gifts, changed them, just as often in vain as with any result. But now that the method of teaching has been reasoned out with unerring accuracy, it will, with the assistance of God, be impossible that the desired result should not follow.
- Of **schoolmasters**, the greater number of whom have been quite ignorant of their art, and who used therefore to wear themselves out when they wished to fulfil their duty, and to exhaust their strength in laborious efforts; or used to change their method, trying in turn first one plan then another—a course which involved a tedious waste of time and of energy.
- Of **students**, who may master the sciences without difficulty, tedium, complaints, or blows, as if in sport and in merriment.
- Of **schools**, which, when the method has been established, will be not only preserved continuously in full vigour, but increased without limit. For they will indeed become places of amusement, houses of delights and attractions, and since (on account of the infallibility of the method) each student, of whatever capacity, will become a doctor (of a higher or lower grade), it will never be possible for a dearth of suitable school-teachers to arise, or for learning not to flourish.

- Of **states**, according to the testimony of Cicero. With whom agrees that of Diogenes the Pythagorean. For what is the foundation of the whole state? Surely, the development of the young. Since vines that have not been well cultivated will not bear good fruit.
- Of **the Church**, since the proper organisation of schools alone can bring it about that the churches shall never lack learned doctors, and that learned doctors shall never lack suitable hearers.
- And lastly, it is to the advantage of **heaven** that schools should be reformed for the exact and universal culture of the intellect, that those whom the sound of the divine trumpet is unable to stir up may be the more easily freed from darkness by the brilliancy of the divine light. For, although the Gospel be preached everywhere (and we hope that it will be preached to the ends of the earth), still the same thing is apt to happen as takes place in any meeting-place, tavern, or other tumultuous gathering of men, that not he alone is heard or gains particular attention who brings forward the best things, but that each one occupies with his own trifles the man near whom he happens to sit or to stand. Thus it comes to pass in the world. Though the ministers of the Word fulfil their duty with great zeal; though they talk, orate, exhort, testify, they none the less remain unheard by the greater part of mankind. For many never go to religious meetings except by chance; others come with their ears and eyes closed, and, as their minds are occupied with other matters, pay little attention to what is taking place. And lastly, if they do attend and grasp the purport of the sacred exhortation, they are not so greatly affected by it as they should be, since the accustomed sluggishness of their minds, and the evil habits that they have acquired, blunt, bewitch, and harden them, so that they are unable to free themselves from their old custom. And thus they stick fast in their habitual blindness and sin, as if bound so firmly by chains that none but God Himself could free them from their ingrained perverseness. As one of the fathers has said, it is very near a miracle if an inveterate sinner be converted to repentance. Now, as in other matters, so in this; where God supplies means, to ask for a miracle is to tempt Him. Let us therefore consider it our duty to meditate on the means by which the whole Christian youth may be more fervidly stirred up to vigour of mind and love of heavenly things. If we can attain this we shall see the kingdom of heaven spread more and more, as of old.

Let none therefore withdraw his thoughts, desires, strength, or resources from such a sacred undertaking. He who has given the will, will also grant its fulfilment, and we ought without exception to demand this with good heart from the divine mercy. For the salvation of man and the glory of the Most High is at stake.

Johann Valentin Andreae

P.S. "It is inglorious to despair of progress, and wrong to despise the counsel of others."

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

Written by Johann Valentin Andreae as a foreword within the full work.

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