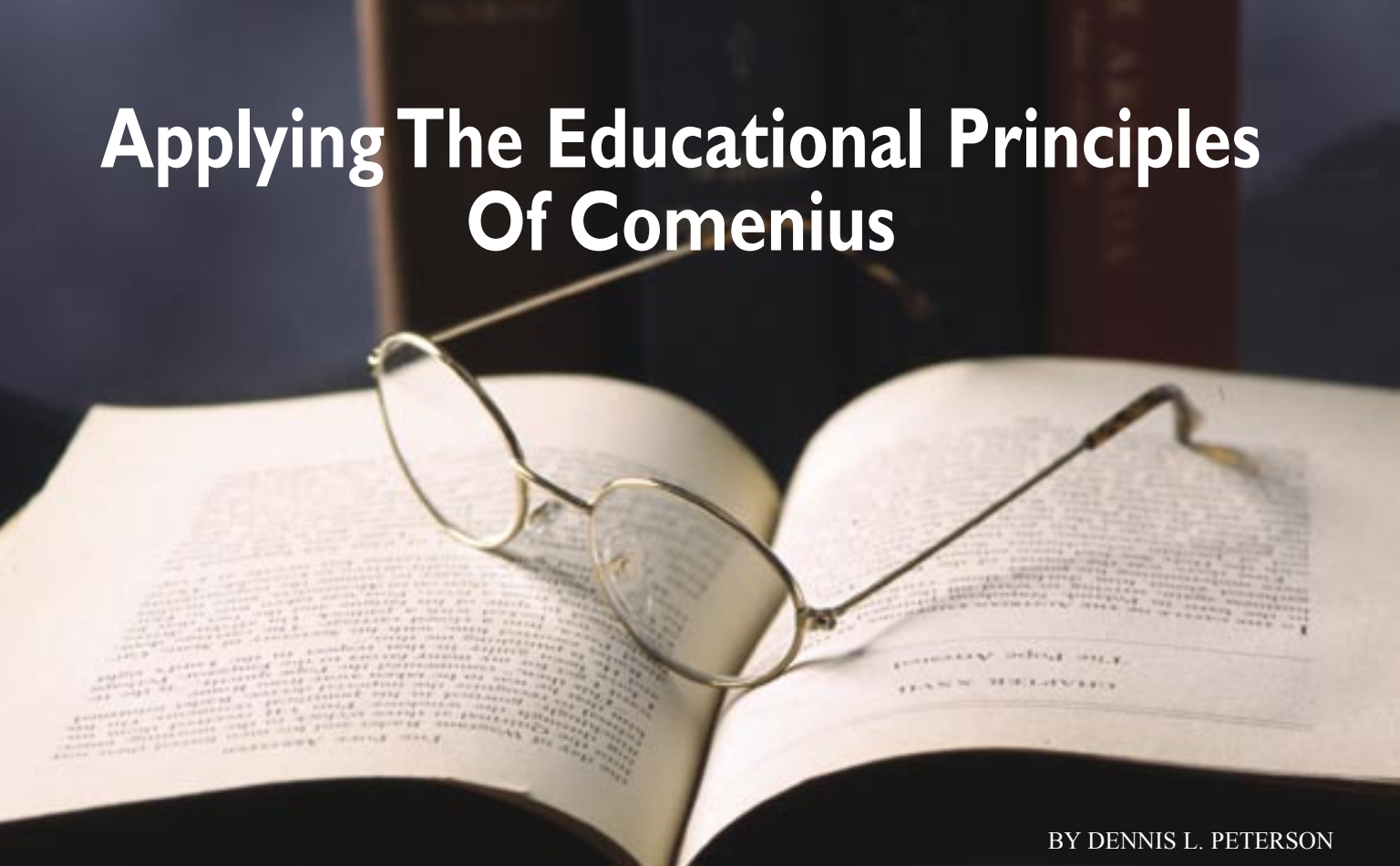


# Applying The Educational Principles Of Comenius



BY DENNIS L. PETERSON

In their never-ending search for better ways to teach, educators are tempted to be enamored of anything new and to eschew what they perceive to be outdated or old-fashioned. Sometimes, however, some of the best “new” teaching principles turn out to be long-forgotten or neglected old ways.

Such might be the case with the educational principles of seventeenth-century churchman and educator Comenius. His ideas at first were considered radical or revolutionary, but they quickly proved to be “the wave of the future.” He has been acclaimed as “the greatest pedagogue of the Reformation era” (Grimm, 1973) and is widely considered to be “the Father of Modern Education” (Curtis, 1987).

Unfortunately, many teachers today are unfamiliar with either the man or his contributions to their profession. Recently, however, a resurgence of interest in his work has been occurring. Although not everyone might agree with everything Comenius believed educationally or theologically (especially his tendency toward ecumenicity), we can still learn much from his life and works, and from his practical principles to improve instruction in the Christian classroom.

## Biographical Background

Johannes Amos Komenski was born on July 28, 1592, in Nivnic, Moravia, in what today is the Czech Republic. His parents died of the plague when he was twelve. When he was sixteen, he entered a Latin school in Prerov, where, in spite of suffering “under a difficult and unattractive method” of instruction, he exhibited an “eager love of learning” (Weinlick, 1966). He later described the educational methods of that day

as “the terror of boys and the slaughterhouses of the mind” (Curtis, et al., n.d.).

The friendly headmaster, however, “recognized his gifts and encouraged him to train for the ministry” (Pioneers of Psychology, 2001). Comenius went on to study at Herborn and Heidelberg, during which time he adopted the Latinized name Comenius.

Returning home in 1614, he became headmaster of the high school; a minister could not be ordained until he was twenty-four, and Comenius was too young. Two years later he was ordained in the church of the *Unitas Fratrum*, variously known as the Moravians, the Unity, the United Brethren, and the Unity of the Brethren. In 1618, he became the pastor at Fulnek and settled down to a life of academic studies and spiritual service to his congregation.

In that same year, after the Thirty Years War erupted between Protestant and Roman Catholic forces, Comenius’s life was never the same. After the Protestant army was defeated in the Battle of White Mountain, the Catholic victors invaded his town and burned it to the ground. They mandated Roman Catholicism to be the only legal religion, and he, as a Protestant clergyman, was forced to flee for his life. The “common people were corralled back into the Roman Church” (Smolik, 1987). While Comenius was in hiding, his wife and child died in the plague.

Comenius fled Moravia and was forced to live for the next seven years “the life of a fugitive in his own land, hiding in deserted huts, in caves, even in hollow trees” in Bohemia (Bock, 1987). In 1628, he and a small group of Protestants

fled to Poland. For the next forty-two years, he “roamed the countries of Europe as a homeless refugee” (Bock). Wherever he and his Moravian brethren went, “they found persecution, caught between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics” (Michel, 1987).

Although he spent much of his exile in Poland, Comenius also traveled at various times to Transylvania, England, France, Sweden, Germany, and Holland, but he never again saw his homeland, Moravia. While he was in England, he was invited to become the president of Harvard, but he declined. Instead, he did become the educational advisor to the Swedish government. He also helped the Hungarian government reform its school system. Nonetheless, he was always poor, although various wealthy and influential patrons met his basic needs and supported his writing and teaching ministries.

But Comenius was productive in exile. He “ministered faithfully to the needs of his scattered congregation, supporting it with the proceeds from his writings. Strangely enough, these came mostly from his books on education—a field which he himself considered secondary to his pastoral ministry” (Bock). He wrote 154 books, many of which were banned by the Roman Catholic Church. One of his most ambitious works was a Czech-Latin dictionary, on which he worked for forty-four years, but it was destroyed in a fire in 1656 just before it was to go to press (Weinlick).

Comenius made his final home in Amsterdam, “where the schoolmasters were jealous of him” (LeBar, 1958). He died in November 1670, “surrounded by friends in an intellectually stimulating atmosphere” (Weinlick). He was buried at the French Reformed Church in Naarden.

## Educational Views

Although Comenius was a pastor, theologian, philosopher, author, and activist for world peace, his greatest fame and contributions came as an educator. A firm believer in life-long learning, he stated that the most important teaching began in the home during the first six years, during which the parents—especially the mother—laid the moral and religious foundations for the child’s life.

But education went much farther than that. Jean Piaget stated, “Education, according to Comenius, is not merely the training of the child at school or in the home; it is a process affecting man’s whole life and the countless social adjustments he must make” (Michel).

## Pansophism

Comenius called his educational philosophy *pansophism*, by which he meant that a proper education “would lead to knowing the good (and God who established the good) and

thus doing and seeking the good” (Heidebrecht, 1987). Smolik (1987) declared, “For Comenius there was always only one truth. The light of reason must submit in obedience to the will of God. This is Comenius’s fundamental pedagogical and pansophic principle.”

“The useful purpose of all knowledge,” Comenius believed, “is to manifest the glory of God and to inspire man to love all that is good.” Although he believed that learning was “universal” and “encyclopaedic,” that fact did not mean that everything was worth learning. “Rather, it implied a way of organizing the facts of knowledge so they would express wisdom and constitute knowledge of practical utility” (Heidebrecht). He also believed, however, that all learning should include instruction in “morals and piety” (Armstrong, 2002).

Perhaps Gutek (1987) summarized pansophism best when he wrote,

Pansophism sought to embrace all knowledge within an integrative system, multi-dimensional in its scope but holistic in its purposes. Comenius asserted that: (1) God’s plan of creation was orderly and that human knowledge of the world should also be orderly in its organization; (2) it is possible and desirable for human beings to possess this knowledge of an ordered creation in a systematic fashion and to use this knowledge to create orderliness in their personal lives and social behavior; (3) ordered knowledge would stimulate a love of wisdom that, transcending national boundaries and sectarian divisions, would help humankind to create an orderly and peaceful social order.

## Importance of Early Training

Foreshadowing the work of Jean Piaget, Comenius wrote in his 1631 book *The School of Infancy* about his observations of the first six years of a child’s life and education. In it, he elaborated on the following principles:

- Children are God’s most precious gift, “an inestimable treasure,” and therefore “claim our most vigilant attention.”
- Individuals are to be concerned about their spiritual, moral, academic, and artistic development.
- “[C]hildren do not train themselves spontaneously, but are shaped only by tireless labor,” which is the task of both parents and teachers (Comenius, 1987).

The foundation for such instruction, Comenius contended, is laid in the home during the preschool years; the superstructure is erected in the classroom.

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## Life-long Learning Program

Perhaps the greatest work by Comenius was *The Great Didactic*, in which he set forth his birth-to-death educational system and described his methods for teaching effectively. His system began with the parents and proceeded to initial schooling through college and beyond.

He noted that nature provides a perfect example of how the best instruction is given. Comenius “observed a fundamental order and purpose and from these he deduced a set of universal principles applicable to education,” which led, in turn, to “certain conditions for effective teaching” (Heidebrecht). He believed that it was better and easier “to work *with* the processes of nature rather than *against* them” (LeBar, 1987).

Kleinert (n.d.) described these conditions thus: “The child should grow into knowledge by assimilation, should not be forced but should be assisted to know, to think, and to speak. But the object should ever be to understand all that is worth knowing of God, the world, and oneself.”

“Quickly! Pleasantly! Thoroughly!” That was how Comenius encouraged the teachers of his day to conduct their classroom instruction. He believed that teachers should employ the students’ five senses more rather than relying primarily on the rote memorization of facts. He sought to make learning interesting and fun for the students rather than a boring chore. To do that, he wrote, published, and introduced *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (“The Visible World in Pictures”), reputedly the first illustrated children’s textbook.

As LeBar (1958) pointed out, however, not all of the responsibility rests on the teacher; the student has to have a strong desire to learn. The student “was to become actively involved in his own training” because “development comes from within.” The teacher, books, and various media might *help* the student learn, but “the learner must do his own growing.” Comenius, however, did not like the idea of using artificial incentives that produced short-lived interest that passed as soon as the incentives were no longer available. He preferred to cultivate and take advantage of the students’ “native curiosity” and to direct it “into constructive channels rather than” repress it.

Comenius was also a firm advocate of practice and hands-on learning. Students learn to read by reading, to write by writing, to sing by singing, to think by thinking, etc.—that is, by *doing*, by using multiple senses, not just by reading about things or seeing someone else demonstrate the activity.

He believed that the teacher should bring into the classroom the actual objects about which the students were learning

so they could see and touch them. Where that was impossible, Comenius advocated the use of representations: models, drawings, charts, maps, globes, etc. No doubt, he would have reveled in the multiplicity of computer applications, audio-visual devices, and other tools of opportunity that we enjoy in the modern classroom! But he also insisted that periods of intense study be alternated with periods of “plenty of physical activity.”

Yet, Comenius was balanced in this emphasis, too. As LeBar (1987) noted, “While educators through the centuries have tended to go either to the extreme of overemphasizing the disciplines of knowledge or the experience of the learner, Comenius kept these two essentials of teaching in balance.”

Perhaps the central principle upon which Comenius’s philosophy of education rested was having a clearly defined goal and a curriculum that progressed in stages according to the students’ natural abilities and with discipline and genuine interest in their advancement. Achieving this goal required that the teacher understand the concepts of readiness, individuality, and mental development (*how* students learn).

Smolik notes that Comenius revealed “interest in psychology at a time when psychological consideration in education had no place at all. His instructions on how to proceed catechistically with children from the earliest age demonstrated how sensitively he took into account the ontogenesis of the child and how he complied with the levels of mental development.”

Underlying all of his methodology, however, was his desire to honor the Lord and produce students who would do the same. “From the beginning,” he wrote in *The Great Didactic*, “it is necessary to form practical and not theoretical Christians, if we wish to form true Christians at all. For religion is a real thing and not a reflection of reality, and should prove its reality by the practical results that it produces, just as a seed that is planted in good earth soon germinates” (Comenius, 1923).

The ultimate goal, of course, was Christlikeness. In his first written work, an allegory titled *Labyrinth of the World* that preceded and has been compared to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Comenius had Christ speak thus to his pilgrim: “Let it be [the] summit of thy learning to seek me in all my works, and to see how wondrously I rule thee and everything. . . . But thou must seek all this learning, not that thou mayest please others, but that thou mayest come nearer me” (Michel).

Comenius reiterated the importance of the spiritual in *The Great Didactic*: “[S]chools, when they educate [students], must educate them in every way, and suit them not only for the occupations of this life, but for eternity as well.”

## Practical Applications

Most of the principles that Comenius elucidated were radical in his own time. Today, many of them are commonplace. Too often, however, educators are too eager to dispense with the tried-and-true methods to pursue the latest educational fads and gimmicks. The wise teacher would do well to reflect



on the principles of Comenius and find ways to continue incorporating them into instruction even while introducing the best of the new methods and media.

Read carefully each of the following statements by Comenius (from *The Great Didactic*). Then spend some time contemplating ways in which you can apply them to the stated topics in brackets in your own classroom situation.

*We can all benefit from a study of the principles of Comenius; our students will benefit from their application in the classroom.*

- “[I]t is a sign of the divine wisdom to do nothing in vain, that is to say, without a definite end or without means proportionate to that end.” [Goals/objectives]
- “No one doubts that those who are stupid need instruction. . . . But in reality those who are clever need it far more, since an active mind, if not occupied with useful things, will busy itself with what is useless, curious, and pernicious. . . .” [Challenging bright but bored students]
- We must “illumine the intellect, direct the will, and stimulate the conscience, so that the intellect may be acute and penetrating, the will may choose without error, and the conscience may greedily refer all things to God.” [Biblical Integration]
- “If we wish to serve God, our neighbors, and ourselves, it is necessary for us to possess, with respect to God, piety; with respect to our neighbors, virtue; and with respect to ourselves, knowledge.” [Biblical Integration]
- “[E]verything that is taught [should] be carefully defined and kept in its place, so that not only the teacher, but the pupil as well, may know exactly what progress he has made and what he is actually doing.” [Evaluation]
- “[A]ll that precedes should be the foundation of all that comes after. . . .” [Scope and sequence]
- “[T]he keener the teacher himself, the greater the enthusiasm that his pupils will display.” [Personal enthusiasm]
- “The teacher should take the greatest care never to speak unless all his pupils are listening, nor to teach unless they are all attending.” [Classroom management]
- “The scholar should be trained to express everything that he sees in words, and should be taught the meaning of all the words that he uses.” [Evaluation]
- “[I]f some characters are unaffected by gentle methods, recourse must be had to more violent ones, and every means should be tried before any pupil is pronounced impossible to teach.” [Order/discipline]

We can all benefit from a study of the principles of Comenius; our students will benefit from their application in the classroom. Perhaps then each of us can understand Piaget’s declaration: “Comenius is thus among the authors who do not need to be corrected or, in reality, contradicted in order to bring them up to date, but merely to be translated and elaborated” (Curtis, 1987). ■

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