

<Book Review>

*Breaking Tradition: An Exploration of the Historical
Relationship Between
Theory and Practice in Second Language Teaching*
by Diane Musumeci (McGraw-Hill, 1997)

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Language teaching is sadly lacking in any sense of tradition, and as far as historical matters are concerned the situation is even worse. In the minds of many language teachers their profession began in the 1970s, when something called the Audiolingual Method (*a bad thing*) was triumphantly defeated by Communicative Language Teaching which, being what all right-thinking teachers nowadays practice, is therefore *a good thing*. A few may remember that in the dim and murky past there was something called Grammar-Translation, but nobody knows much about that except that it involved a lot of grammar and a lot of translation, and was therefore obviously *a very bad thing*.

This state of affairs is not due to a collective amnesia but to an ahistorical approach on the part of the language-teaching profession generally. We have deliberately aligned ourselves with the scientific method in our research, in our publications, and in the increasing politicization of our professional organizations. We draw strength and insights from adjacent disciplines, themselves deeply scientific in outlook. We seek public approval and government support for programs designed to have an impact on the structure of society. We exude a new confidence based on the world's need to interact globally in all sorts of languages. We language teachers hold, in this con-

ceited view, the key to international cooperation and understanding, and to a brave new pluralistic and peace-loving universe.

The one area from which we do not draw strength, to which we do not turn for models, and which is conspicuously missing from the training of our future leaders, is the past, our own past. Do we have no past, or is it all irrelevant? Is there no connection between the teaching of, say, Latin and Greek in the periods known as the Reformation and the Renaissance and our own teaching of, say, English or French in the late twentieth century? Is there no thinking that has a bearing on our times and on our classrooms? Were there no great language teachers who might provide worthwhile models, or who may have wrestled with problems similar to those we face today? Do all our models — and very often the main speakers at our conferences — have to be educational psychologists, neurologists, sociologists, pure linguists or sociolinguists, or assorted social reformers whose agendas include language teaching? It appears that language teaching is willing to look anywhere for inspiration except in its own back yard.

But Diane Musumeci's *Breaking Tradition* does look into the language teaching back yard, and that makes it unique, especially when its particular focus is to reassess the word *tradition*. This word bothers the author on account of its generally negative connotations, or, perhaps more accurately, on account of the ambiguity with which practitioners use it. She cites, on the one hand, a graduate research student asking whether research done as long ago as the 1970s would be admissible in a paper, and on the other a long-serving language teacher dismissing out of hand a presenter's suggestion that students should focus on meaning instead of using pattern drills. In short, we all lack what Musumeci calls "the vantage point of temporal distance" (p. 5), which would provide a "historical perspective on second language teaching" (p. 7). This, she believes, would not only deepen our awareness of where

we, as a profession, have been, but would give us access to “previously ignored evidence” (p. 7) on such topics as curriculum, administration, and materials.

These three areas — curriculum, administration, and materials — were, respectively, the prime concerns of three key figures from the past: Guarino Guarini in fifteenth century Italy, Ignatius of Loyola in sixteenth century Spain, and Comenius in various parts of Europe in the seventeenth century. All three attempted to solve what they saw as the pressing language teaching problems of their time. What exactly were these “problems,” and how could fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century issues possibly be related to ones we encounter today?

Guarino Guarini (1374–1460) is Musumeci’s example of the curriculum innovator, the kind of language teacher after whom nothing is the same again. Others have called him “the greatest teacher in a century of great teachers” (Grafton & Jardine, 1982, p. 52). Along with the Greek Chrysoloras, Vergerius the Paduan professor, and Vittorino the teacher to the Prince of Mantua, Guarino was one of the leading humanists of his age. In that sense he was one of a group who, fired with the ideals of Quintillian and the works of Cicero and the glory that was Greece, swept aside the medieval *auctores* and put in their place a new paradigm, the *studia humanitatis*. Guarino himself ran famously successful schools in Ferrara, first under the patronage of Lionello d’Este, Prince of Ferrara, and subsequently under his own management. By the time he died at age 80 he was celebrated throughout Europe as a teacher of Latin and Greek.

This is all very well, but Musumeci now introduces her main thesis: although Guarino Guarini was a great innovator and adored by all his pupils for his vision and teaching skill, his techniques were doomed to be either lost or distorted. The reason for this lay in the fact that he never formally set out his

teaching method. He wrote many letters to patrons and scholars, did various translations, wrote his *Regulae grammaticales* (c. 1418), and edited a selection of 50 of Cicero's letters for school use. But the explication of his teaching method fell to his son Battista, who was in turn his pupil, then his assistant, and finally his successor in the running of the school. The result was *De ordine docendi et discendi* (The Program of Teaching and Learning) written in 1459. This book, Musumeci argues, did not reflect Guarino's ideals or method, but debased them in various ways more befitting a pedant than a visionary.

Musumeci's analytical method is to place some of Guarino Guarini's letters, many of which have come down to us, alongside related passages in Battista's book. The dichotomies thus revealed allow Musumeci to reconstruct Guarino Guarini as a teacher well ahead of his time, for example as an advocate of direct method teaching, of wide authentic reading, and of content-based instruction, to name just a few modern concerns. Battista for his part is preoccupied with rules, norms, accuracy, correction, and other retrograde activities — even though these may have been closer to the general expectations of the time.

By the time of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), the once-innovative pedagogy of the *studia humanitatis* had become established doctrine. It provided the newly founded Jesuits (1534) with a basic curriculum which they exploited in all the schools they founded — some 35 between 1548 and 1565 in Italy alone (Grendler, 1989, p. 370). The problem was to maintain a consistency of instruction across all these institutions, since their novel idea of giving free instruction guaranteed a large and generally enthusiastic enrollment. Loyola felt it to be his personal mission to lay down rules for the conduct of education within all Jesuit institutions.

The governing principles of the Society of Jesus were set out by Loyola in

the *Constitutiones*, a document he kept updating until his death. Part IV of the *Constitutiones* deals with educational matters, and there he sets out a basic teaching method, together with administrative matters such as class sizes and even holidays to be taken. In addition, at the time he was composing this section (between 1547 and 1550) he wrote numerous letters to Jesuit schools giving direction or advice on particular problems. Musumeci offers samples of both Part IV and of the letters, building up a picture of Loyola as a powerful administrator for whom no detail was insignificant.

Like Guarino Guarini, Loyola had modern ideas about teaching, for example wanting Latin to be used actively and communicatively both inside the class and outside. He advocated an immersion approach aimed at oral and written fluency. As Musumeci says:

Within Ignatius's pedagogy, Latin is a fully functional language in both oral and written forms. It primarily conveys meaning: It transmits moral messages as well as historical facts and rhetorical figures. [It] is the medium of communication across all contexts of use: from the most casual and private interactions among peers to formal public performances. Neither is it purely an artifact to be studied, nor is its use relegated to only one, academic, context. (p. 50)

As an administrator, Loyola brought some of his previous military experiences to the problem of maintaining standards across schools placed in different regions and countries. He was pragmatic ("Try to preserve the good will of the prince"), had a sound business sense ("Acquire real estate near the center of the city"), and knew the value of communication ("Write us every week for help and guidance"). He left intact a flourishing system of education, inspired by ideals whose shadows are still with us.

Unfortunately, his immediate successors saw fit to revise his work following his death in 1556. For 40 years committees of Jesuits labored to transform his thoughts into a working document. When this finally appeared in 1599,

the *Ratio Studiorum* (Plan of Study) bore little resemblance to Loyola's lofty ideas. Rules are given for conducting examinations, awarding prizes, correcting papers; for the behavior of rectors, prefects of study, teachers and even janitors; there are even rules for reviewing the rules! Latin was viewed as a system of precepts, not as a system of communication. The document was, as Musumeci says, "distinguished by its pedantry" (p. 55).

To be fair to the committees that produced the *Ratio*, the situation regarding the status of Latin had changed during the almost half century from Loyola's time to 1599. While Loyola could still maintain the idea of Latin as a language of wider communication, this was no longer the case as Jesuits looked into the seventeenth century. The rise of vernaculars had been swift and powerful, and it was now clear that they, not Latin, were the direction of the future. For Latin there was a fatal "separation of language and content" (p. 69), as Musumeci says. Latin no longer had a functional aspect, and the trend towards rules had taken over.

The case of Comenius (1592–1670) differs from that of either Guarino Guarini or Ignatius Loyola. He did not have a son to misrepresent him, or enthusiastic but misguided successors to distort his ideas: he was well able to create confusion himself, especially when he tried to grapple with teaching methodology. As a textbook writer, however, he remained very clear, and it is for this that Musumeci focuses on him.

Comenius' experiences in school left him with the conviction that the teaching of Latin by the learning and application of rules — the tradition that we have seen in Battista Guarino's book, and that was later reinforced by the *Ratio* — was ineffective. Whether it was his Protestant upbringing, or the ready availability of the printing press, or his egalitarian and Pansophic beliefs, his response was to create materials that were more pupil friendly than those in use. In this he found himself at odds with the humanist tradition

which, as we have seen, revolved around the classical authors. In modern terms, Comenius would be seen as coming out of a linguistic rather than a literary background.

This linguistic approach was clearly popular with teachers, who welcomed his first book, *Janua Linguarum Reserata* (The Gate of Language Unlocked, 1631) as being more suitable and easier than existing materials. The *Janua* took a basic vocabulary of 8,000 words and arranged them into 1,000 sentences under headings such as fire, diseases, trade, arithmetic, and so forth. These headings therefore contained specific, situational vocabulary related to the increasingly scientific world of the seventeenth century. Two years later, apparently on account of the feedback he got from teachers, Comenius added an easier book, the *Vestibulum* (Porch) with a less ambitious word list. Both books reflected his desire to work from a real-life situation rather than from a grammar. His other “best seller” (Sadler, 1966, p. 268) was the *Orbis Pictus* (Picture of the World, 1658) which ran to 21 editions in the seventeenth century, 43 in the eighteenth, 33 in the nineteenth, and even nine in the twentieth century! It was innovative at the time because of its use of pictures to accompany and illustrate the vocabulary.

Comenius’ genius with textbooks unfortunately did not extend to language teaching methodology, or indeed to his other writing on teaching and learning. Even regarding textbooks, his rejection of the *studia humanitatis* and its replacement by what we would call today a lexical syllabus did not, in the final analysis mean getting rid of the classical authors. Musumeci shows the contradictions inherent in his *Great Didactic* (1657): for example, learn one language at a time, or learn four (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and one modern); rules are “like thorns to the understanding” but they “assist and strengthen the knowledge derived from practice”; teachers should be “gentle and persuasive” but “if any pupil be found who is not paying attention, he should be reprimanded”.

manded or punished on the spot"; and so on. One result of these contradictions is that, like the Bible, Comenius' writings may be produced in support of almost any viewpoint.

Comenius' inconsistencies have been remarked on elsewhere (e. g., Howatt, 1984, p. 49, though in the context of a laudatory exegesis of his work), but in general commentators (e. g., Murphy, 1995) have attempted to see beyond the inconsistencies to the overall achievement, which remains remarkable. Musumeci's ambiguity about Comenius produces a man "sandwiched between competing paradigms: the scientific and the religious" (p. 106). She comments that he is "schizophrenic," and that his underlying theory of language teaching defies reconstruction. Such language reveals the author's palpable frustration that Comenius' feet of clay are all too evident. This frustration may be the result of some loss of focus in this chapter, since Comenius was originally presented to the reader as an innovative textbook writer, but is then blamed for a non-uniform methodology.

The view that all three were visionaries who saw language as a system of communication makes a reappearance in the fourth and final chapter. Musumeci's contention is that we use the word "tradition" in a generally pejorative sense, without taking note of the alternative — visionary — tradition that these three men exemplify. Further, some parallels may be drawn between the fate of the Communicative Approach (CA) in our time and the fate that befell the earlier idealistic thinking: in the hands of its originators it was, and looked, good. In the hands of the unreformed masses of teachers it became watered down, leaving a tasteless brew into which older forms must be added to give it some flavor. Thus CA has been narrowed to mean chatting about one's family, giving directions, telling the time, and so forth: the idea of really communicating ideas across languages has been lost. Various authors from the 1980s and 1990s are shown to be infiltrating grammatical

structures, error correction, and other older techniques into CA. In such classes, “the lesson still remains grammar-driven” (p. 123). Content-based instruction is the only exception to this general decline, though unfortunately it “has not been widely accepted by the teaching profession” (p. 124).

The fate of innovation itself is therefore the final question posed by this book. When innovation is separated from its theoretical underpinnings — as happened in the case of Guarino, Loyola, Comenius, and of CA — it is quickly rendered a “compendium of rules to be followed” (p. 127) and invites hollow prescriptivism. The author therefore calls for a more theoretically-informed teaching profession; one, for example, that would place intellectually challenging material in front of language students, and one that would take seriously the needs of students progressing at different rates. In short, we have not learned the lessons of the past, since our *beliefs* — as a profession — have undergone no real conversion.

This short but important book is not the last word on the subject, and does not pretend to be. The treatment of two of the visionaries — Guarino Guarini and Ignatius Loyola — is clear and easily comprehended; in the case of Comenius the complexity of the subject and his writings has not been as fully set out as it might have been. The final chapter, which should make the vital connections for the modern reader, is at best diffuse. Despite this, the book would be excellent on a modern “methods” course, and programs should consider its inclusion for the depth it gives to discussions of innovation in general, and of materials, administration, and methodology in particular.

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