

THE THEORY OF EDUCATION

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649017829

The Theory of Education by William T. Harris

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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**THE THEORY
OF EDUCATION**

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Cambridge
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SCHOOL ROOM CLASSICS. XV

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—OF—
EDUCATION

—BY—
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COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION



SYRACUSE, N. Y.
C. W. BARDEEN, PUBLISHER
1898

THEORY OF EDUCATION

1.—Education in the Past.

PREPARATORY.

In this age of revolution and self-styled reform, we are called upon to listen to protests against every form of existing reality. It is well that the rationale of all we have and are should pass under the scrutinizing review of the censor. But it is better to be able to see positive features than merely to be able to utter protests. Meanwhile the merely negative is better than the death of stagnation.

Our systems of education are no better than they should be,—far from it. But it does not follow that any change would be for the better. Only when we can see the full grounds for the reality of a system, can we set about improving it wisely.

Text-book education has been the subject of much abuse for three-fourths of a century

among educational men in Europe and this country. The great writers of the English language in the seventeenth century have anticipated most of the objections now urged. One will find admirable statements of them in Locke and Milton, and, what is more, he will find them so temperate as to escape the extremes into which our later day protests have developed.

It is with a view of throwing some light on this important question that I commence its study afar off at the beginnings of our system of school instruction, and trace its affiliation with the political history of modern times.

HISTORICAL.

Just about four hundred years ago Wm. Caxton, the first English printer, was engaged on the first of his works—the history of Raoul le Fevre—“*Receuil des histoires de Troys.*” The same year printing was introduced into Milan and Venice. It seems that the *invention* of the art of printing dates back of this some thirty years, and that the firm of Johann Faust and Gutenberg commenced the business of printing books in

the city of Mentz in the year 1450. The epoch is a notable one in history.

Three years after the partnership of Faust-Gutenberg, Constantinople fell into the hands of the Turks, and the Eastern Empire closed its career. The "Wars of the Roses" depopulated England of her nobility to such an extent that the royal power rose nearly to absolutism in the dynasty of kings that followed and in the next reaction, the power of the Commons came uppermost. In Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella united their crowns, and drove out the last vestige of Moorish power from Europe the same year that "Genoese Columbus launched his adventurous fleet into the Western ocean." The Medici family were at the height of power in Florence, and Loranzo the Magnificent ascended the throne the same year that Caxton completed the history we have named. Under his reign were born the great Michael Angelo and the great Raphael. Marcilius Ficinus, the reviver of the profound study of Plato and the Platonists of Alexandria, was his schoolmaster.

What with the revival of learning and the

discovery of new worlds, the mastery over the Moslem, the invention of printing, and the bloom of romantic art, the "Time River," as Goethe calls it, was indeed swollen to overflowing, and in the age following there arose in Europe the modern States system, and the "Balance of Power" developed through the wars of Charles the Fifth, with Francis the First and Henry the Eighth. At this epoch appeared the REFORMATION, and the new impulse toward independence of authority. Luther, Erasmus and Melancthon appear at the same time as Copernicus, with the "true system of the Universe," and Roger Ascham, the school-master, teaching Greek to Queen Elizabeth.

With the spread of the art of printing came the cheapening of books and the stimulus to popular education. According to Diesterweg, the eminent German educator, "the present system of common or public schools—that is, schools which are open to all children under certain regulations—dates from the discovery of printing, in 1436, when books began to be furnished so cheaply that the poor could buy them." He remarks: "Especially after Martin Luther had trans-

lated the Bible into German, and the desire to possess and understand that invaluable book became universal, did there also become universal the desire to know how to read. Men sought to learn, not only for the sake of reading the Scriptures, but also to be able to read and sing the psalms and to learn the catechism. For this purpose schools for children were established which were essentially reading-schools. Reading was the first and principal study; next came singing, and then memorizing texts, songs, and the catechism. At first the ministers taught; but afterwards the duty was turned over to the inferior church officers, the choristers and sextons. Their duties as choristers and sextons were paramount, and as schoolmasters only secondary. The children paid a small monthly fee, no more being thought necessary, since the schoolmaster derived a salary from the church."

The mode of instruction at this early period of public school history is characterized by Diesterweg in the following words: "Each child read by himself; the simultaneous method (that of classes) was not yet known. One after another stepped up to the

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table where the master sat. He pointed out one letter at a time, and named it; the child named it after him; he drilled him in recognizing and remembering each. Then they took letter by letter of the words, and by getting acquainted with them in this way the child gradually learned to read. This was a difficult method for him. Years usually passed before any facility had been acquired; many did not learn in four years. It was imitative and purely mechanical labor on both sides. To *understand* what was read was seldom thought of. The syllables were pronounced with equal force, and reading was a monotonous affair. The children drewled out texts of scripture, psalms and the catechism from beginning to end. As for the actual meaning of the words they uttered, they knew almost nothing of it." This, with "stern severity and cruel punishments," completes his picture of that stage of the school system.*

But the movement thus begun was no superficial one; it was wide and deep as all European civilization, and it signified noth-

*This and the passages from Rousseau, are quoted from translations given in *Barnard's Journal*.