

Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach . . .

answer, to go to the next, and then the next, until the correct answer was given. He understood that peer pressure works. Indeed, for translation work, he advocated having students take turns publicly challenging each other's work, making corrections out loud before the entire class.

Conclusion

Von Raumer called Comenius "a grand and venerable figure of sorrow," who, though "wandering, persecuted, and homeless . . . never despaired," but "with enduring truth, and strong in faith, he labored unweariedly to prepare youth by a better education for a better future."⁴¹ Like the crowd of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews 11–12, he ran his race looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of his faith. There is much we can learn from Comenius, but these eight reforms represent at least a start. Perhaps your school is already doing these things. If so, rejoice and do not grow weary in well-doing. Perhaps your school needs a reminder. If so, this is your opportunity to put Comenius's reforms into practice. Your school has a race to run.

Notes:

1. Quoted in Simon Somerville Laurie, *John Amos Comenius ... His Life and Educational Works* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1884), 23.
2. George Grant, "Heroes of the City of God: Not of This World," *Tabletalk*, March 2004, 58–59.
3. All citations and quotations from *The Great Didactic* are from Laurie, *John Amos Comenius ... His Life and Educational Works*.
4. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
5. *Ibid.*, 82.
6. *Ibid.*, 124.
7. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
8. *Ibid.*, 125–26.
9. *Ibid.*, 128.
10. *Ibid.*, 129.
11. *Ibid.*, 129–30.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 78.
14. *Ibid.*, 79.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
17. *Ibid.*, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, 87.
19. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
20. *Ibid.*, 98.
21. *Ibid.*, 97.
22. *Ibid.*, 90.
23. See Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006); Douglas Wilson, "A

- Review of Wisdom and Eloquence," *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007); Matthew Allen and Joe Bray, "Re-Thinking the Trivium?" *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007); Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, "Authors Respond to Re-Thinking the Trivium?" *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007).
24. Josef Smolik, "Comenius: A Man of Hope in a Time of Turmoil," *Christian History*, issue 13 (1987).
 25. Quoted in Laurie, *John Amos Comenius*, 84.
 26. *Ibid.*, 85.
 27. *Ibid.*, 87.
 28. *Ibid.*, 97.
 29. *Ibid.*, 87.
 30. *Ibid.*, 92.
 31. *Ibid.*, 91.
 32. *Ibid.*, 123.
 33. Lois Lebar, "What Children Owe to Comenius," *Christian History*, issue 13 (1987).
 34. Quoted in Laurie, *John Amos Comenius*, 32.
 35. *Ibid.*, 97.
 36. *Ibid.*, 105.
 37. *Ibid.*, 103.
 38. *Ibid.*, 110.
 39. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
 40. *Ibid.*, 93.
 41. *Ibid.*, 65.

Head, Heart, and Hand: A Simple yet Powerful Construct for Teaching Homer's *Odyssey*

by Timothy Ponce and Dr. Lee Courtney

Thousands of lines to read, hundreds of names to remember, countless ancient social customs to comprehend: it is easy to understand how our rhetoric and logic school students get lost in a work as massive as Homer's *Odyssey*. However, it is the job of the teacher to help the student see how literature is, in

the words of Horace, "*utile dulci*" [useful and agreeable].¹ Although this appears to be a Scylla and Charybdis situation, it need not be. We have developed a construct for teaching Homer's *Odyssey* that is profound, yet simple enough for our students to walk out the door with the power of the poem, thus spurring them on toward virtue.

This construct, or teaching outline, is based upon the declaration of purpose found in the opening lines of the poem. In that declaration of purpose, Homer provides the definition of a hero by using the Greek word *polytropos* to describe the hero Odysseus; Fitzgerald renders this word as "skilled in all ways of contending."² Literally

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translated “with many twists and turns,”³ *polytropos* provides a powerful description of the hero’s versatility, yet the question nags in the back of the reader’s mind: “If the hero is skilled in all ways of contending, what are those ways?” Continuing to use the Fitzgerald translation, we argue that if the verbs in the subsequent lines are examined, one can interpret the various “ways of contending.” For example, “saw” and “learned” can be interpreted as an intellectual excellence, “weathered” can be interpreted as an emotional excellence or staying power, and “fought” can be understood as a physical excellence.⁴

The idea of excellence, or *areté* in the original Greek, is the path by which classical heroes obtain their ultimate goal, *kleos* or glory; hence, in any evaluation of a classical hero, his or her *areté* must be evaluated. Using the tripart construct of “intellectual,” “emotional,” and “physical” excellence as a character-tracking and evaluation tool, each of the three protagonists (Odysseus, Telémakhos, and Penélopê) can be profoundly studied, yet easily retained by the student. To help our students remember the three “ways of contending,” we use the mnemonic devices of alliteration and analogy, describing intellectual excellence as “the way of the head,” emotional excellence as “the way of the heart,” and physical excellence as “the way of the hand.” To further clarify, we will provide a few examples of how each one of the protagonists fits into these categories, although many more examples exist

than the ones provided here.

The “way of the head,” or intellectual excellence, manifests itself in the three protagonists through a combination of comprehension, curiosity, and cunning. Comprehension, not only knowing information, but also learning from failure, can be seen in Odysseus

when he admits to Alkínoös, king of the Phaiákians, that he “would not heed [his men] in [his] glorying spirit” after he had conquered the great Polyphêmos.⁵ Odysseus displays his intellectual excellence by being willing to admit that he was wrong and that, through his hubris, many of his men were lost. In addition, Odysseus and Telémakhos both display curiosity on numerous occasions, but the most poignant example is the parallel reactions of father and son upon entering the court of their respective hosts. As he enters the palace of Alkínoös, “Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea, / stood in the gateway and surveyed this bounty. / He gazed his fill . . .”⁶ Likewise, upon entering the palace of Meneláos, Telémakhos, like his father, stops to gaze in curiosity at this unprecedented site.⁷ Both Odysseus’ and Telémakhos’ curiosity momentarily overrides their primary objective of meeting with their respective host. This love of learning and knowledge is part of the *areté* that these two show in the area of intellectual excellence. Odysseus and Telémakhos both show cunning in multiple instances, but arguably the most

memorable instance of cunning in the *Odyssey* comes from Penélopê’s trick of the shroud.⁸ Through her cunning, Penélopê displays her intellectual excellence, thus spurring her on to *kleos*.

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The “way of the heart,” or emotional excellence, is displayed by the protagonists via perseverance, poise, and faithfulness. Odysseus exhibits the ultimate form of perseverance when he confronts one of the greatest enemies of humanity, despair. He struggles with one of the most fundamental problems of human existence: “Should I go over the side for a quick finish / or clench my teeth and stay among the living?”⁹ This prolific question has been echoed by such famous literary figures as Hamlet in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy. It is Odysseus’ persistence that allows him to persevere in the face of so many obstacles and move down the path toward *kleos* via emotional excellence. A moving example of poise comes from Telémakhos when he sees his father being mistreated by one of the suitors. “Telémakhos, / after the blow his father bore, sat still / without a tear, though his heart felt the blow.”¹⁰ Although Telémakhos’ natural reaction would have been to rush to the aid of his beloved father, he demonstrates emotional excellence by maintaining control of his emotions even in the most difficult of circumstances. When the word faithfulness is used in

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conjunction with the *Odyssey*, the first character that comes to mind is Penélopê. In a meeting with Odysseus, who is in the guise of a beggar, Penélopê admits “my looks, / my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded / when the Akhaïans crossed the sea to Troy, / Odysseus my lord among the rest.”¹¹ Penélopê counts her famous beauty as forfeit because the only person that she desires to please with it is her husband.

The “way of the hand,” or physical excellence, is exhibited by the protagonists through strength and skill. Odysseus shows strength, brute lifting power, on multiple occasions, for example, when he chops down twenty trees in moments on Kalypso’s island,¹² or clings to the cliff face of the Phaiákian island.¹³ However, we also see him take part in activities where skill is more important than mere strength. For example, while in the court of Alkínoös, Odysseus takes part in a series of athletic contests, one of which is the discus.¹⁴ A successful discus throw does involve strength, but it also relies heavily on funneling that power into a precise form and execution. Telémakhos displays both strength and skill when he attempts to string his father’s bow. At the last moment, as he is about to string the weapon, Telémakhos, at the signal of his father, relents and passes the bow to another contestant so that their master plan of revenge will not be disrupted.¹⁵ This accomplishment requires Telémakhos to not only use strength to bend the bow, but also his skill in stringing such a weapon. The physical excellence of Penélopê takes on a slightly different form as she is not chopping down trees, throwing a discus, or stringing a bow.

Penélopê’s physical excellence, as understood by her culture, would have been found in her beauty. Eurymakhos comments, “Penélopê, / Deep-minded queen, daughter of Ikários, / if all Akhaïans in the land of Argos only saw you now! What hundreds more / would join your suitors here to feast tomorrow! / Beauty like yours no woman had before, / or majesty, or mastery.”¹⁶

Although we have provided only a limited number of examples in this article, additional examples that fall into this easy-to-remember tri-part construct will quickly surface upon a rereading of the poem. This outline makes a work as long and complex as the *Odyssey* extremely accessible to a wide variety of students and can be easily incorporated into existing teaching and reading plans. Assignments such as dialectical journal entries or organized reading notes are an excellent companion to this teaching outline. It has been used as a summer reading plan with rhetoric school students, and it proved to be highly enjoyable and beneficial for them; the construct was simple enough to follow during independent study over the summer and students were able to track the protagonists and primary plot points using this system. This allows the teacher to begin the school year strong and quickly move through a large quantity of material without the fear of leaving students behind.

In light of Homer’s definition of a hero as described in his statement of purpose at the beginning of the poem, it is safe to say that all three of the protagonists show how they are “skilled in all ways of contending.” This tri-part outline is a simple, yet effective tool to

help students fully capture a comprehensive view of how the protagonists use *areté* to gain *kleos*.

Notes:

1. Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, trans. H.R. Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 478.
2. Ralph Hexter, *A Guide to the Odyssey: A Commentary on the English Translation of Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 1.1-9.
5. Ibid., 9.545–546.
6. Ibid., 7.142–144.
7. Ibid., 4.77–81.
8. Ibid., 2.100–117.
9. Ibid., 10.57–58.
10. Ibid., 17.641–643.
11. Ibid., 19.147–150.
12. Ibid., 5.252–253.
13. Ibid., 5.453.
14. Ibid. 8.195.
15. Ibid., 21.140–150.
16. Ibid., 18.307–313.