

Priority, politics and pedagogical science Part II: the priority dispute and a standard model of pedagogy

Bruce Curtis

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

The conflict between Joseph Lancaster, Andrew Bell and their respective supporters over priority in the discovery and development of monitorial schooling usually appears as a quaint historical episode in work on this pedagogy. This two-part article focuses on it directly. Part one outlines the literature on conflicts over priority in techno-scientific discovery. It examines the early history of monitorial pedagogy and shows that the initial contacts between the eventual protagonists were more or less in a spirit of experimental cooperation. Part two documents the conditions for the emergence of the dispute over priority in invention and follows its course through the periodical, pamphlet and sermon literature. The article concludes by noting that while claims to novelty and invention in pedagogy were ultimately abandoned, nonetheless, agreement on a standard model came to be accepted as the basis of pedagogical practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 July 2015
Accepted 21 June 2016

KEYWORDS

Priority disputes; monitorial schooling; boundaries of science; discovery; politics of education

Conditions for the priority dispute

Monitorial schooling was a novel technology of population government and subjectification, which, in a period of dramatic social and political economic transformation, could not but be politically charged.¹ In the English case, versions of monitorial schooling pitted supporters of Anglican ascendancy, promoters of the unity of church and state, anti-Catholic and pro-war activists, large landed property, and Romantic intellectuals against a rising Nonconformist, philanthropic bourgeoisie and its utilitarian intellectuals, in a battle for hegemony. Virtually every dimension of monitorial schooling was seen to have implications for this struggle. It was made more urgent by the growth of utopian socialist movements and the creation of independent, working-class educational institutions modelled on Robert Owen's New Lanark. Many Church supporters were opposed to Catholic Emancipation and

CONTACT Bruce Curtis  bruce_curtis@carleton.ca

¹I have detailed the political struggles and strategies that involved monitorial school societies and the Episcopal Churches in the case of colonial Quebec in B. Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling Quebec: Conquest to Liberal Governmentality. A Historical Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

were alarmed when Richard Lovell Edgeworth's Irish Education Commission, which had consulted Bell, settled on Lancaster's model for Irish schools.²

A venue for debate was furnished by the new political periodicals that flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the High Church *British Critic* joined the long-established, Nonconformist *Monthly Review* in 1793; they were followed in 1802 by William Cobbett's *Political Register*, by the Evangelical *Christian Review*, and by the liberal Whig *Edinburgh Review*. Joseph Lancaster's virulent opponent Sarah Trimmer published her own periodical *Guardian of Education* between 1802 and 1806, before moving to attack Lancaster in a book-length piece. The Tory *Quarterly Review* appeared in 1809, to counter the influence of the *Edinburgh*, and there were a large number of others, such as the *Philanthropist* and the *Pamphleteer*; and the *Westminster Review* (1823), later edited by J.S. Mill. The various reviews summarised the sermons, books and pamphlets involved in the priority controversy and authors and editors wrote essays on the subject. Robert Southey, a youthful Jacobin, and then Lancaster supporter until 1807, consolidated his literary talents and rehabilitated himself sufficiently in establishment eyes to become poet laureate in 1813, in part by becoming Andrew Bell's leading champion in the *Quarterly*.³

Trimmer's attack

It was Sarah Trimmer who worked to mobilise opposition to Lancaster and it was probably her connections that led to the wave of attacks on him that began in 1805–1806. She assailed his pedagogy in her *Guardian of Education* and added to it in a lengthy *Comparative View* in late 1805.⁴ In September of that year, she began to correspond with Andrew Bell, urging him to get involved in the opposition, insisting that Lancaster was falsely claiming priority in invention. She sent him a copy of her *Guardian* and noted that, since reading Bell's *Experiment*, "I plainly perceived Lancaster had been building on your foundation". She added that she could not "see this 'Goliath of Schismatics' bearing down all before him, and engrossing the instruction of the common people, without attempting to give him a little check".⁵

Bell responded quickly with an account of Lancaster's Christmas visit, commenting on "his consummate front, his importunate solicitation of subscriptions in any and every shape, his plausible and ostentatious guise", and reporting that he had "detailed many particulars of my practice, and many opinions on the conduct of a school, with which he was in some points totally unacquainted". He conceded that Lancaster had done much to develop his system, but "how far he has directed it to the best purposes, and whether he has intermixed

²J. F. C. Harrison, "The Steam Engine of the New Moral World': Owenism and Education, 1817–1829," *Journal of British Studies* 6, no. 2 (1967): 76–98. C. Lambert, "Living Machines': Performance and Pedagogy at Robert Owen's Institute for the Formation of Character, New Lanark, 1816–1828," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 4, no. 3 (2011): 419–33. H. Silver, ed., *Robert Owen on Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). B. Simon, *The Two Nations & the Educational Structure, 1780–1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974).

³T. Duggett, "Southey's 'New System': The Monitorial Controversy and the Making of the 'Entire Man of Letters,'" *Érudit* 61, April (2012): 1–33.

⁴S. Trimmer, *A Comparative View of the New Plan of Education promulgated by Mr Joseph Lancaster, in his tracts concerning the instruction of the children of the labouring parts of the community; and of The System of Christian Education founded by our pious forefathers for The Initiation of the Young Members of the Established Church in the principles of the Reformed Religion* (London: R.C. and J. Rivington and J. Hachard, 1805).

⁵Trimmer to Bell, 24 September 1805, in *The Life of the Rev. Andrew Bell...*, 3 vols, ed. R. Southey and C. C. Southey (London and Edinburgh: John Murray and William Blackwood & Sons, 1845). The Trimmer–Bell correspondence is in chronological order in vol. II, 131–60.

much quackery, conceit, and ignorance, is another question”⁶ Trimmer then stressed the dangers represented by Lancaster’s schools: “Of all the plans that have appeared in this kingdom likely to supplant the Church, Mr Lancaster’s seems to me the most formidable. I will not say he has any ill intentions; but his plan is favourable, in an eminent degree, to those who may have.” It was just the sort of “generalising plan” that had provoked French Jacobinism and, while Trimmer did not deny that Lancaster had developed Bell’s system, nor deny him “the merit of having brought it into operation in this country”, without Bell’s invention “he could by no other means have obtained” success. She had visited Lancaster’s school at his invitation and had been “highly gratified ... with the order and management of it”, but she was offended by his sitting like a little king on a throne surrounded by what he called “my nobles” (his students). The school was orderly and quiet, and she thought the military-like movements of the students were diverting, but not a pedagogical improvement.⁷

It was the pretence of teaching without religious doctrine that was especially offensive, and Lancaster’s own character and conduct were again at issue. Trimmer had told him, through Priscilla Wakefield, that she planned to criticise him in print and Lancaster responding by sending a delegation of his students to her own school to offer his compliments, then writing to her to solicit a subscription: menacing arrogance. To Trimmer, Lancaster’s claims to be a Quaker were simply a ruse he had employed to marry his pretty wife, but they allowed him to take all sorts of interpersonal liberties, even in his interview with the King, something the established Church would certainly never permit.⁸

Trimmer then laid out the line of attack that she proposed to follow: she would not take on Lancaster’s supporters or subscribers, but would denounce him on moral grounds and on his false claims to invention. Bell quickly came on board. He read the 1805 edition of *Improvements* and thought that while Lancaster showed “admirable temper, ingenuity, and ability” in his devices for preventing disorder and encouraging emulation, these were simply refinements to the system. He sent an annotated copy of the *Improvements*, noting where Lancaster was indebted to him, which Trimmer used in composing her *Comparative View*, and Bell congratulated her on the latter:

You have achieved a work of great national importance. J.L. would not have been unmasked for years but for you. Ever since I conversed with him, and read some of his familiar letters, I have suspected that he has much assistance in his published works of every kind. He is illiterate and ignorant, with a brazen front, consummate assurance, and the most artful and plausible address, not without ability and ingenuity, heightened in its effects under the Quaker’s guise. His account of his family in unguarded moments – Dissenters, Roman Catholics, Infidels – is most extraordinary.⁹

Bell’s stance hardened noticeably after this communication and he agreed with Trimmer that they needed to join together to direct the attack on Lancaster. Thus, in contrast to the situation in science and technology studies, in the domain of pedagogy, claims about priority in invention first came into play as moral, not scientific, issues.

Now an assault on Lancaster began in earnest. The morality of the man himself, and the dangerous moral, political, and religious threats posed by his plans to promote a national

⁶Bell to Trimmer, 28 September 1805, in Southey and Southey, *Life of Andrew Bell*.

⁷Trimmer to Bell, 1 October 1805, in Southey and Southey, *Life of Andrew Bell*.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Bell to Trimmer, 14 October, 11 December 1805, in Southey and Southey, *Life of Andrew Bell*.

system of education figured centrally.¹⁰ Anyone who would wrongly claim priority was a thief, and no thief should be allowed to instruct the poor. The implicit logic was that the demonstrably effective work of the honourable inventor deserved support, and so Bell's system should be adopted.¹¹ As a science-in-formation, pedagogy had no institutionalised norms by which to adjudicate such claims, but priority was meant to give leverage over political decisions. Protagonists were forced to attempt to specify what constituted an invention, and how one might recognise a legitimate inventor, as opposed to an imposter.

Moral politics

Defending either version of the pedagogical method thus meant defending the claimant, but even with his friends Lancaster was difficult and irresponsible. The Duke of Kent described him as a person of “violent temper” and Sussex saw him as easily “bewitched” by flattery and a “slave at the shrine of that seducer”. William Allen's biographer observed that, with the grant of royal patronage in 1805:

... large subscriptions poured in upon [Lancaster] from all quarters; but, unaccustomed to the use of money, and naturally enthusiastic, imaginative, and extravagant, he soon became involved in great pecuniary difficulties, writs were out against him, and his creditors were clamorous.¹²

Lancaster squandered huge amounts on his school, but also on himself, to the point that at least one Irish hotelier later seized his luggage for non-payment of his bill. His taste for the company of juvenile boys and his extravagance in touring about with them were seen as improper.¹³

By 1808, his debts amounted to about £4000 and his close supporters had to get him out of debtor's prison. Joseph Fox put up most of the money to pay the debts and the supporters organised themselves into the Royal Lancasterian Association to try to take money matters out of Lancaster's hands and to make him deliver accounts of expenditure. He was encouraged to manage the practical parts of the Borough Road model school, but resented interference in his affairs. The coming of the Regency in 1811 cost the support group its royal patronage, while Lancaster became increasingly intractable. Without consulting the Association's committee, he started another boarding school, which failed in 1812, again leaving him deeply in debt. The committee agreed to bail him out one final time, but with a set of conditions: all school business would be conducted under the Association's name; Lancaster would promote the work, especially by superintending the Borough Road School, but again under the committee's direction; and he was to incur no further unauthorised expenditure. He was forced to make title to the Borough Road site and all related property over to the committee. Not content with this arrangement for long, Lancaster began abusing his supporters in public and in correspondence with the Duke of Kent. Finally, at

¹⁰Patrick Ressler has pointed out that the successful spread of monitorial schooling was due to semi-modern marketing techniques, yet one of the charges against Lancaster was precisely that he was a marketer: importunate, not hesitant to make a spectacle of himself; willing to promote his schools in ways that no decent person, and certainly no respectable clergyman such as Andrew Bell, would do. P. Ressler, “Marketing Pedagogy: Nonprofit Marketing and the Diffusion of Monitorial Teaching in the Nineteenth Century,” *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 3 (2013): 297–313.

¹¹Science studies has noted that the choice of object of study may lead to attributions about the moral/political qualities of the researcher, but does not see priority disputes as moral matters, unless research norms are violated.

¹²J. Sherman, *Memoir of William Allen, F.R.S.* (Philadelphia: Henry Longstreth, 1851): 61–2.

¹³Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D/530/22/27, Lancaster to Thompson, 13 May 1815. G. Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place* (London: Longmans, Greene, 1898): 62–3; 94–5.

an 1813 meeting convened by Kent, with Joseph Hume and Samuel Whitbread present to calm him, Lancaster behaved “very imprudently” and the group decided to break with him once and for all. There was demonstrable evidence of “an unsavoury scandal” involving his flogging of boys at Borough Road and Lancaster was forced to resign from the school. The committee members now became the British and Foreign School Society and Lancaster wandered around Britain denouncing his former friends until finally about 1818 he was convinced to leave for America.¹⁴

It is not clear to what extent Lancaster’s erratic and intemperate conduct was provoked by the wave of attacks on him that began in 1805–1806, but soon his published work acquired a defensive tone, and he began to claim loudly to be the sole inventor of monitorial schooling. The title of his abridged 1808 edition of the *Improvements* added the phrase *Invented and Practised by the Author* and he announced that his plan was “ORIGINAL”. True, it had been “deeply injured in many respects by artifice and BIGOTRY”, yet attacks on it had failed. Lancaster was now presenting:

... the plan ORIGINAL as it is to the country. The same cannot be found in any other work, unless copied, or pirated, and I leave its enemies, as well as my own, to the reproach of their own hearts, and the goodness of a righteous Creator, at whose hands I hope they will find mercy, they do not merit.¹⁵

Anyone else who claimed to be teaching the system without a licence from Lancaster himself was an impostor. There was next to nothing in his plan that had come from Bell: “Of all the ideas in this plan there is only one borrowed from the *Hindoo* mode of *education*, that is printing in sand, and it is materially improved and *only* applies to the A.B.C. *class*.”¹⁶

Bell also came to make loud and outlandish claims about discovery as the conflict unfolded. He needed to justify his inaction in promoting his system before Lancaster’s success, and in the 1808 edition of *The Madras School* he explained that people in India had told him to say nothing about it in England, because no one would believe in such a miraculous invention. The modesty and diffidence attached to his clerical role also encouraged silence and self-effacement. Only after people who had tried to use his model pleaded for more detail did he decide to publish again. But now he was not shy about what he had accomplished:

Even in the mere point of the health of the body, and the preservation of the animal life of man, Vaccination, the most valuable discovery in the physical art, of which this country, or the world, can boast, falls short of this invention.¹⁷

It was one that offered “the means of supplying a remedy for the disorders of filth, idleness, ignorance, and vice, more fatal to children than the ravages of the Small-Pox”. There was no mention in this work of anything Lancaster had done or that Bell had borrowed from him.¹⁸

In response to a series of attacks in summer 1811 in the *Morning Post*, Lancaster now insisted that Andrew Bell had done nothing whatsoever about promoting schools until the royal patronage was given to Lancaster himself. It was only then “that Dr Bell was *dragged*

¹⁴Sherman, *William Allen*, 94–5; 107–8. S. Smith, “Education of the Poor,” *Edinburgh Review* 19, no. 37 (1811): 1–41. Wallas, *Francis Place*, 107–8.

¹⁵J. Lancaster, *Improvements in Education; Abridged. Containing a Complete Epitome, of the System of Education, Invented and Practised by the Author* (London: J. Lancaster, Free School, Borough Road, Southwark, 1808), iii–vi.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷A. Bell, *The Madras School, or Elements of Tuition...* (London: J. Murray, 1808), viii.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 130ff.

out of his retirement to claim a plan, the merit of which *I assert is not his*; and but for the glitter and sound of that patronage” no more would have been heard of Bell.¹⁹ In 1811’s *Report of J. Lancaster’s Progress*, there was no mention of Bell or of anyone else in relation to the system’s development. In educating the poor, wrote Lancaster, “in every respect I had to explore a new and untrodden path”, had also “friendships to make, connexions to form, the plan itself to invent; and, in fact, every thing depending upon my individual exertions”. Lancaster was simply “the Founder of the system”.²⁰

Lancaster’s publications became cloyingly self-congratulatory. By his 1833 *Epitome*, composed soon after he fled Montreal to escape debts and charges of assault and battery, he announced that a “singular concentration of powers has been found and admitted to exist in Joseph Lancaster,” enumerating 11 of them. He had never wasted a farthing on his own enjoyment, “he was destitute of every luxury”, “he went to no dinner parties, neither invited or visited the parties of his friends”. Everything had been sacrificed for the good of the poor and mankind.²¹

Priority

Sarah Trimmer’s 1805 attack on Lancaster’s pedagogy invoked Bell’s priority of invention as a side note to a more general denunciation of the encouragement of social mobility, ambition and godlessness among the poor. This main line of attack lost much of its force as it became increasingly evident that simply keeping the poor ignorant, pious and contented was not a viable political strategy. Practically, George III’s endorsement of Lancaster, Samuel Whitbread’s failed 1807 attempt at a national school system, and the growing numbers of Lancasterian schools shifted the grounds of debate. Even those who, like Patrick Colquhoun, opposed free social mobility acted to promote schools and schooling. The political issue increasingly became not whether but how to educate the poor and the growing industrial proletariat. Fears about social revolution, ignorance, impiety and mobility remained central to the debate, but what kind of religious and moral schooling to adopt came to the fore. While the machino-facture of young people had its opponents, the ruling groups on the whole supported monitorial schooling.

Bell’s version was presented by Trimmer as first and best. Her *Comparative View* gave a pocket history of Bell’s experiments, and showed that Lancaster only began teaching after they were complete. Lancaster acknowledged Bell’s influence in his *Improvements*, and “Dr Bell, therefore, we are to regard as the original inventor of the admirable plan which Mr Lancaster has adopted”. Bell invented the system, Lancaster helped spread it, but in a deformed version.²² Patrick Colquhoun’s description of his Orchard Street school attributed the basic invention of monitorial schooling to Bell as well.²³ Bell himself and his

¹⁹Southey and Southey, *Life of Andrew Bell*, II, 325–6, quoting Lancaster in the *Morning Post*.

²⁰Joseph Lancaster, *Report of J. Lancaster’s Progress from the Year 1798, with the Report of the Finance Committee for the Year 1810; To which is prefixed, an Address of the Committee for Promoting the Royal Lancasterian System for the Education of the Poor* (London: Royal Free Press, 1811), vi.

²¹J. Lancaster, *Epitome of some of the chief events and transactions in the life of Joseph Lancaster, containing an account of the rise and progress of the Lancasterian System of Education; and of the author’s future prospects of usefulness to mankind: Written by himself, and published to promote the education of his family* (New Haven, CT: publisher unknown, 1833), 23–42. J. Lancaster, *Report of the singular results of Joseph Lancaster’s new discoveries in Education made at Montreal, from the commencement in 1829 to complete development of the systematic principle in 1833* (Montreal: publisher unknown, 1833). For Lancaster’s controversial stay in Montreal, Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling*, 181–4.

²²Trimmer, *A Comparative View of the New Plan of Education promulgated by Mr Joseph Lancaster*, 18–20; 139.

²³P. Colquhoun, *A New and Appropriate System of Education for the Labouring People* (London: Hatchard, 1806), 14.

supporters intervened directly with Samuel Whitbread in 1807. At a meeting, Bell corrected Whitbread's belief that Lancaster was the inventor of the pedagogy. Lancaster was present in an adjoining room, but Bell refused Whitbread's attempt to get the two together, saying that a piece in the *Star* newspaper in which Lancaster claimed to be the system's inventor had disgusted him.²⁴ The London lawyer, anti-Jacobin and leading member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, John Bowles, responded to Whitbread's parliamentary speech in favour of Lancaster with a critical pamphlet. Everyone would agree on the mechanical utility of the pedagogy, he wrote, although it worked so well that it might disqualify the poor for their destined stations in life. Yet the generic Christian version whose basis "Mr Lancaster borrowed, without acknowledgement of the obligation, from Dr Bell" would produce a dangerous unprincipled population.²⁵ The theft of the invention and its godless results were side by side.

The priority debate heated up with the arrival of the Regency. The Church organised the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, took away the royal patronage from the Lancasterian Association, and soon dwarfed the latter by virtue of its superior financial and organisational resources. The Cambridge divinity professor Herbert Marsh attacked Lancaster in a series of letters, "A Vindication of Dr Bell's System of Tuition", in the *Morning Post* in September 1811 and then preached the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge's anniversary sermon, *The National Religion the Foundation of National Education*, with a similar attack on the theft of Bell's system. At least three editions of the sermon were printed and it was a clever, tightly argued and annotated attack on Lancaster and his allies.²⁶

Certifying that the issue was no longer whether but how to school the poor, Marsh first argued that, while Dissenters were perfectly free to school their children as they wished, members of the Church of England were duty-bound to support it and its schools. By teaching a generic Christianity, Lancaster undermined the doctrine of the Church. The monitorial pedagogy was remarkably powerful and productive; thus, as it was "calculated to create indifference, and even dislike, to the established church, the most powerful engine, that ever was devised against it, is now at work for [the church's] destruction". The problem was not with the pedagogical machine: apart from the religious issue "this system of education has in *other* respects so much to recommend it" and the "*mechanical* part has advantages, which no other system possesses". In fact, Marsh continued:

... the religious part of this system is neither an *essential*, nor even an *original* part of it. The admirable *mechanism* of this system ... was originally combined with the doctrines of the established church; and these doctrines were not detached from it, till it was *adopted* by that active and intelligent Dissenter, who brought it into general circulation. It was invented more

²⁴Southey and Southey, *Life of Andrew Bell*, II, 188–9.

²⁵J. A. Bowles, *A Letter addressed to Samuel Whitbread, Esq. M.P., in consequence of the unqualified Approbation expressed by him in the House of Commons of Mr Lancaster's System of Education; the religious Part of which is here shewn to be incompatible with the Safety of the Established Church, and in its Tendency, subversive of Christianity itself. Including also some cursory Observations on the Claims of the Irish Romanists, as they affect the Safety of the Established Church* (London: Hatchard, 1807), quoted in *Joseph Lancaster and the Monitorial School Movement. A Documentary History*, ed. C. F. Kaestle, Classics in Education. No. 47 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973), 114–19.

²⁶H. Marsh, *A Sermon, preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London, on Thursday, June 13, 1811: Being the time of the Yearly Meeting of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools in and about the Cities of London and Westminster To which is added a Collection of Notes and Illustrations*, 2nd ed. (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, 1811).

than twenty years ago, by a Clergyman of our own Church, who also first practised it, and practised it with great success, in a public institution at Madras.²⁷

Bell was referred to repeatedly as the “ingenious inventor” and Marsh set the bar for invention very low: the key element was simply “tuition by the students themselves”.

Marsh, then citing Lancaster at length, showed that he had acknowledged Bell’s invention and had communicated with him about the details. Marsh falsely placed this communication in 1802, rather than in late 1804: that is, before the 1803 edition of the *Improvements*. Lancaster had tried to use the pedagogy, but had to appeal “to the Inventor of the System” for help in putting it into effect. Thus the “intelligent Dissenter” had the merit of promoting the system, but had the fault of removing its religious content.

And so, Marsh told his audience, “we have the choice of the new system in two *different forms*”, one respecting the doctrine of the Church of England, one not. “Both forms are alike *accessible*: both forms are equally *practicable*.” Books and apparatus existed for both and the “Inventor of the System” is as willing and able to promote it as his rival. Members of the Church should obviously support the Madras version and Marsh concluded that while “like Columbus” Bell had “lost the honour of giving name to his own discovery”, and while “the *title* has been transferred to him, who, in adopting the system, has estranged it from the establishment, the Inventor has suffered no diminution of his real *worth*.”²⁸ As Joseph Fox commented on Marsh’s sermon, “those who oppose Mr Lancaster ... are now endeavouring to convict him of a breach of morals, so flagrant, as to render him unworthy of the distinguished support he has experienced.”²⁹

Lancaster’s opponents received reinforcement as Robert Southey began writing regularly in the *Quarterly Review*. Some of his material was considered too vituperative for the *Review* itself and was published separately, especially his 1812 *The Origin, Nature, and Object, of the New System of Education*. According to Southey, there were two issues in the controversy, “a personal one as respecting its author, and a political one respecting its application”, and he usefully repeated the basis for a claim of discovery: “The person who first introduced into a school the principle, *as a principle*, of conducting it by means of the scholars themselves, is as much the discoverer of that principle, as Franklin of electricity, or Jenner of vaccination.” As Trimmer had done, Southey too gave a pocket history of Bell’s work, showing it had been mentioned in an *Analytical Review* article of 1798 and that it had been put into practice in several schools before Lancaster began teaching. Lancaster’s 1803 acknowledgements were again noted and Southey recounted what Lancaster had learned from Bell during their 1804 meeting.³⁰

Southey went through the practices Lancaster had introduced, agreeing that writing on slates was an improvement, but not really an invention, while most of the other elements in his model had been pioneered elsewhere or were in common use in schools for centuries. He defended Bell against the charge that, like Mandeville in his *Fable of the Bees*, he wanted

²⁷Marsh, *A Sermon*, 13–14. Original emphasis.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 18–24.

²⁹J. Fox (Pythias), *A Vindication of Mr Lancaster’s System of Education, from the Aspersions of Professor Marsh, the Quarterly, British, and Antijacobin Reviews &c. By a Member of the Royal Institution*, 2nd ed. (London: Royal Free School Press; Longman, 1812), 5–6. On the general importance and impact of such sermonising, B. Tennant, *Corporate Holiness: Pulpit Preaching and the Church of England Missionary Societies, 1760–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On the Church’s shifting positions with respect to monitorial schooling, R. A. Soloway, “Education and Social Order, 1783–1830,” in *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England 1783–1852* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 349–89.

³⁰R. Southey, “Bell and Lancaster’s Systems of Education,” *Quarterly Review* 6, no. 11 (1811): 264–304, quotations at 265–7.

to keep the poor ignorant: “it is not true that Dr Bell is among the followers of Mandeville. It is not true that Mr Lancaster invented the system. It is not true even that he was the first person who introduced it into England.” As Coleridge had done earlier, Southey was scathingly critical of Lancaster’s punishments, which were barbaric and which stank of Catholic practices that Southey loathed. There was “mischief” and “mummery” in “Mr Lancaster’s love of badges and parade” and this love “overc[a]me his principles of Quakerism, for he admits that the Order of Merit is a distinction founded on the principles of nobility”³¹

No inventor, no man of consistent morality, Lancaster’s shamelessness gave him an advantage when it came to publicising Bell’s invention. The worth of Lancaster’s pedagogical science was tied to estimations of his moral and political character. As Southey put it, Lancaster’s:

... peculiar character contributed not a little to his success There was nothing in his education, temper, or previous habits of life which rendered it unpleasant for him to travel about soliciting subscriptions; a thing to which, however meritorious and urgent the motive, men of finer minds usually fel[t] repugnant, even when it becomes an act of duty. And while he was impressed with a due sense of the importance of his object, and animated with a fitting zeal for its accomplishment, his humour led him to mingle practices with the system, which, whether they decorated or disfigured it, served to attract notice.³²

Southey’s book-length attack of 1812 repeated the substance of this article, but included a number of disobliging remarks linking Lancaster’s work to Catholic practices, and arguing that his generic Christianity was a vehicle for Catholic dominance.³³

Defending Lancaster’s claims

Sydney Smith, editor of the largest circulation English periodical, the liberal *Edinburgh Review*, was an early defender of Lancaster. Lancaster, he wrote in 1806, had “given to the world new and striking lights upon the subject of education, and [had] come forward to the notice of his country by spreading order, knowledge, and innocence among the lowest of mankind.”³⁴ In a follow-up in 1807, Smith described the workings of the Lancasterian school and countered Anglican objections in detail. Lancaster’s improvements were to be found “in the cheapness of schools, their activity, their order, and their emulation.”³⁵ Smith pointed to the lessons on cards suspended on the schoolroom walls, the use of sand and slates for writing, and the fact that Lancaster’s school used student monitors, instead of the ushers described in Bell’s 1797 pamphlet. Ushers were paid, adult, teachers’ assistants, and so Bell’s students did not teach themselves. Monitors were students who learned while they taught their fellows, part of an automatic machine. Against warnings from Sarah Trimmer that Lancaster was creating future revolutionaries, Smith was especially enthusiastic about the militarisation of the masses. The use of student monitors was “as great an improvement ... as the introduction of noncommissioned officers would be in an army which had been governed only by captains, majors, and colonels”. Every other Lancasterian practice –

³¹Southey, “Bell and Lancaster,” 280–1; 300.

³²*Ibid.*, 275.

³³R. Southey, *The Origin, Nature, and Object, of the New System of Education* (London: John Murray, 1812). Other relevant material is in Southey, “On the Catholic Question” [277–304]; “On the State of the Poor, and the Means Pursued by the Society for Bettering their Condition” [73–155]; and “On the State of the Poor, the Principle of Mr Malthus’s Essay on Population, and the Manufacturing System” [157–247], in *Essays, Moral and Political* (London: John Murray, 1832).

³⁴S. Smith, “Mrs Trimmer on Lancaster’s Plan of Education,” *Edinburgh Review* 9, no. 17 (1806): 177–84, at 177.

³⁵*Ibid.*

including his bizarre punishments – was endorsed, and while Smith agreed that Lancaster had read Bell's pamphlet, he had "made important additions of his own, quite enough to entitle him to a very high character for originality and invention". Smith did wish to detract from Bell, for he was "unquestionably the beginner in an art", but that art needed to be "carried to still greater perfection", which Bell's opposition to teaching the poor to write and count prevented.³⁶

Joseph Fox claimed in a pamphlet of 1808–1809 to be able to ascertain fully "the share of invention that belongs to each gentleman", and that "Mr Lancaster is less indebted to Dr Bell, than Dr Bell to Mr Lancaster". There were four inventions that belonged to Lancaster alone: first, through his system of rewards, and his division of the students into classes, one teacher with a group of monitors could lead a school with a thousand students. Again, using large pasteboard lesson sheets meant that one book would suffice for an entire school and, third, by equipping all students with slates and by having one student spell aloud while the others wrote, 500 students could write and spell together. Finally, abandoning arithmetic texts, such as *Walkingame's Arithmetic* or *Dilworth's Assistant*, meant any student who could read could teach arithmetic with certainty.³⁷

Just as Bell's partisans had traced the traffic from his inventions to successive editions of Lancaster's works, so Henry (later Lord) Brougham, the leading Whig promoter of popular schooling, traced the traffic in the opposite direction, while arguing that many of the things claimed by Bell as "inventions" were in fact long-established educational practices. Here was "the very gist of the controversy": Lancaster's pamphlets showed an ongoing process of improvement in pedagogical arrangements, and these were subsequently picked up and repeated in successive editions of Bell's work. The description of the use of teachers, assistants and ushers at the Madras school was removed from later editions of Bell's *Experiment* and he began to mention only monitors. He took up Lancaster's prizes and rewards and his spelling cards. It was "too unnatural even to be mysterious" that Bell never acknowledged Lancaster's innovations.³⁸

Moreover, Bell had done nothing to advance popular schooling, while Lancaster travelled tirelessly and organised schools with thousands of students. It was Lancaster's success that terrified the Church and its allies, but they could not attack the project directly because of the royal patronage. "The watchmen of the Church ... now openly sounded the alarm of danger to the Establishment", and "Dr Bell must be considered as leagued in most unnatural union with the combination of bigots and time-servers, against one of the greatest benefactors of his species." He was brought out of retirement and his promoters sought to "bring forward his claims to originality ... lavishly applauding his method, and decrying his competitors". Looking over the entire course of events, Brougham claimed it was at least clear that Lancaster was the first to introduce to England and perhaps to Europe "a

³⁶Anon, review of S. Smith, "Outlines of a Plan for educating Ten Thousand poor Children, by establishing Schools in Country Towns and Villages; and for uniting Works of Industry with useful Knowledge. By Joseph Lancaster. 8vo. London. 1806," *Edinburgh Review*, no. 21, October (1807): 61–73, at 71–2.

³⁷The comments are excerpted in Anon, "A comparative View of the Plans of Education, as detailed in the Publications of Dr Bell and Mr Lancaster. By Joseph Fox. [London] Darton and Harvey," *Monthly Review Enlarged* 56, August (1808): 445–6. Anon, "A Comparative View of the Plans of Education, as detailed in the Publications of Dr Bell and Mr Lancaster. The second Edition, with Remarks on Dr. Bell's 'Madras School', and Hints to the Managers and Committees of Charity and Sunday Schools, on the Practicability of extending such Institutions on Mr Lancaster's Plan. By Joseph Fox. 72 pp. [London] Darton and Co. 1809." *Monthly Review Enlarged* 60, November (1809): 332–4.

³⁸Henry Brougham, "Education of the Poor," *Edinburgh Review* 17, no. 33, November (1810): 58–88, 67, 73.

system of education whereby one master can teach a thousand". While Bell continued to use long-established pedagogical practices, Lancaster's teaching of arithmetic by having students read problems and solutions aloud was "a capital discovery, in every point of view" and seemed fair to work in all branches of scientific instruction.³⁹

Sydney Smith and Joseph Fox defended Lancaster and his system against the attacks of Bowyer, Southey, Marsh and others, although the grounds of controversy were shifting. Smith rehashed the early history of the Lancasterian Association and described its reorganisation into what would be called the British and Foreign School Society. He pointed to the pedagogy's spread throughout England and Ireland, into the colonies, and to North and South America. The controversy could thus not be about the effectiveness of the system, but instead the attacks were due to the fact that "it was invented and propagated by a Sectarian". For his part, Smith had "no other ground for preferring Mr Lancaster's method to Dr Bell's, except only this, that it teaches reading, writing and accounts, better and cheaper" than any other method. No one denied that such was the case and Lancaster's enemies denounced it only because he did not teach "the doctrines of the Church of England. This is truly, and in a few words, the present state of the question." Smith countered Marsh's claims that the Church had a legal right to educate the young by pointing out that the Act of Uniformity and past practice both limited clerical involvement to catechetical instruction on Sundays.⁴⁰

To the argument that the Church should organise its schools while Dissenters could keep Lancaster's, Smith replied that letting every sect run its own small schools would be expensive, inefficient and a source of religious antagonism. Moreover:

... the essence of the new method consists in economising the expense of education by teaching very large numbers at once. Beautiful and useful as it is, when applied to schools of a certain size, it is wholly inapplicable to small seminaries; at least, it loses all its advantages.

Considered in this light:

... the balance is turned wholly in Lancaster's favour, by its greater efficiency, and, above all, its economy.⁴¹

Joseph Fox's defence of Lancaster against "the foul charge" of having stolen Bell's invention proposed a means of resolving the priority dispute, once and for all:

When an individual lays claim to any invention in science or mechanics, as in the case of a man suing for a patent, it is requisite that he should, in his specification, establish his right by a full description of his experiments, with their results or produce a working model of the machine for examination.

None of Bell's defenders had been at Madras, and so all the evidence lay in Bell's 1797 edition of the *Experiment*. There, claimed Bell's defenders, it can be seen that "Mr Lancaster has only *adopted* the system which Dr Bell *invented*." But, Fox insisted, in that text "not one plan is mentioned which is intitled to be called an *invention*, or *discovery*".⁴² Writing in sand was an established local practice. Having students "do everything themselves" meant they lined their writing paper and made their own pens, but students did so in most schools. Bell taught arithmetic using a long-established text, and, as a classical scholar himself, he

³⁹Brougham, "Education of the Poor", 82. At the outset of the essay, Brougham offered a lucid defence of the necessity of governing workers and the poor as a project of political subjectification, as I have discussed in Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling*, 128.

⁴⁰S. Smith, "Education of the Poor," *Edinburgh Review* 19, no. 37 (1811): 1–41, quotations at 2–3.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 35–7.

⁴²J. Fox (Pythias). *A Vindication of Mr Lancaster's System of Education, from the Aspersions of Professor Marsh, the Quarterly, British, and Antijacobin Reviews &c.* By a Member of the Royal Institution, 2nd ed. (London: Royal Free School Press; Longman, 1812), 5–6.

must remember having had monitors when he was at school. It was clear that the Madras school used teachers and assistants, not only older students as teachers, and nowhere was there any mention that a single teacher could teach a thousand students using his method.⁴³

As to the charge that Lancaster had stolen Bell's ideas during his visit to him in 1804, Fox quoted from a letter by Bell to Lancaster of 6 December in which Bell congratulated him on "the progress which you had made in a *new mode* of tuition".⁴⁴

Bell had enclosed a copy of the *Experiment* and asked Lancaster to edit it to remove matter that Lancaster found unnecessary. Especially savoury was Fox's reply to Southey's claim that since Bell had first introduced the principle of mutual instruction as such, he was the true inventor of the system. In fact, said Fox, the principle was already in use before Bell. It had been used in a school organised by Chevalier Paulet, an Irishman raised in France, whose Paris school was subsidised by Louis XVI. An account of the pedagogy had appeared in the Geneva papers and was reproduced in England in the *Literary Repository* of 16 April 1788. Fox quoted from the account to show that the principle was firmly established by Paulet, and concluded that, in comparison, Bell had offered an inferior copy of what Paulet had done.⁴⁵

From priority to economy

As parties to the dispute came to accept that there were two versions of a common pedagogical machine at issue, and as the royal patronage was recuperated by the Church, demonstrations of priority in invention lost what practical purchase they seemed to promise. For a time, economy and efficiency were invoked in support of arguments for a single, national system of education. Brougham already posed the matter in these terms in 1810, and similar points were made by Smith and Fox. Anticipating the argument made by Marsh and Southey, Brougham proposed that "the system which [Lancaster] has invented, may be applied to teach the Catechism as well as the Scriptures." Unlike those authors however, his conclusion was that Lancaster's version "should be extolled and adopted, therefore, by all those who really wish to see the Catechism familiar to all the children in the kingdom". If the machine could work on any materials, and given the necessity to educate all, the choice of version should be guided by concerns with economy, efficiency, and inclusiveness.⁴⁶

"As to the grand point of economy", Brougham wrote, "which is, in truth, every thing in this inquiry", Bell's school for 250 students cost £480 a year for his own salary and £672 for his assistants, "three times as much as the expense of the first Grammar School in Scotland"⁴⁷ while Lancaster's master earned a fraction as much and his monitors were unpaid. Expense now was where: "... the whole, or nearly the whole question between the two plans lies, and the whole, or nearly the whole merit of either, as compared with the old system, is comprised ... The grounds upon which the two inventors assert their claims to originality"⁴⁸ ultimately rested on the matter of expense, and Lancaster's claims were obviously superior. The *Quarterly Review's* analysis of the National Society's first annual report accepted the premise of effectiveness. Since the two versions of the machine were so similar,

⁴³Fox, "A Vindication," 5–6.

⁴⁴Bell to Lancaster, 6 December 1804, quoted in Fox, 16–17.

⁴⁵Fox, "A Vindication," 31–6.

⁴⁶Brougham, "Education of the Poor," 85.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 76–80.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

“present utility, and not priority of invention, must determine us in the choice of the two systems, the latter question [i.e. priority of invention] concerns rather the honour of the parties themselves, than the public at large”. But for the *Quarterly*, economy was trumped by the necessity of protecting religious instruction in the legally established state church: “no man, who is attached to our religion, will grudge the additional expense which would be necessary for retaining the poor of the establishment in the religion of their fathers”. The arguments for economy of scale were also rejected: if a teacher could teach a thousand with monitors, he could teach 50, and no material damage to the substance of instruction would result.⁴⁹ Both Smith’s and James Mills’ arguments against sectarian division in schooling were to no avail.⁵⁰

The priority dispute continued to linger for much longer in educational debate, but political-economic power decided the choice of monitorial system until the latter fell out of favour. It is striking that commentators then began to argue that there had been no priority in invention for either Bell or Lancaster because neither had in fact invented anything. As the reviewer of one wave of pamphlets put it, “thousands of men are living, who, with a very little expence of thought, would have invented all” that Bell and Lancaster had. The latter could claim credit only for “having reduced a few simple and very obvious expedients to practice”. People interested in promoting education should no longer ask, “where was the first invention?” but “where is the last improvement?” The question is not about following this man, or that man, but what is the best method of communicating literary instruction to the great body of the people?⁵¹

An 1820 overview of French educational conditions in the *Edinburgh Review* also concluded that Lancaster and Bell had in fact never invented anything. The schools of the Christian Brothers under de la Salle had taught Latin through a phonetic method and Chanoine Cherrier’s description of it revealed that in 1755 they were using large tablets suspended from the walls in each schoolroom as a common book. There were monitors in use in a school for 300 students in the 1740s in the Hospice de la Pitié. Educators in Sparta taught boys in classes, and the practice of sand writing had been noted by Indian travellers in the seventeenth century and was mentioned by Erasmus. Indeed, in 1780 the Chevalier Pawlet (or Paulet) had published a description of a school with 200 boys that used mutual instruction, distributed prizes and rewards, and had a school jury. “Every one of these methods ... contains something of the modes applied by Bell and Lancaster”, commented the reviewer and so it was “evident that every method adopted in the new schools, had been known and practised, long before the existence of any of the modern claimants to the merit of invention.”⁵²

Conclusion

The Bell–Lancaster controversy survives as a curiosity for histories of education, while its significance for a fledgling science of pedagogy has been ignored. It would be reasonable

⁴⁹Anon, “Review of First Annual Report of the National Society for promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church...,” *Quarterly Review* 7, no. 15 (1812): 1–27; 2; 23.

⁵⁰S. Smith, “Education of the Poor,” *Edinburgh Review* 21, no. 41 February (1813): 207–19. J. Mill, *Schools for all in preference to Schools for Churchmen only; or, the State of the Controversy between the Advocates for the Lancasterian System of Universal Education, and those who have set up an exclusive and partial System, under the Name of the Church and Dr Bell* (London: Longman, 1812).

⁵¹Anon, “Tracts relative to Bell’s and Lancaster’s Schools,” *Monthly Review Enlarged* 68, May (1812): 83–95, at 95.

⁵²Anon, “Education of the Poor in France,” *Edinburgh Review* 33, no. 66, May (1820): 493–509, at 498.

to conclude that the denial of invention and discovery in this case certifies that pedagogy did not qualify as a discovery science with a rapidly shifting research frontier, even given that monitorial schooling was a novel practice of world-making. One could accept that the individual elements of the system pre-dated it and yet accept that dramatically new insights and practices emerged from the articulation of them into a system. In that sense, Bell and Lancaster would be somewhat similar to contemporary scientific researchers doing meta-analyses of past published work in search of new insights.

Thus, oddly, the denial of discovery, and hence of any essential difference between the two versions of the system, effectively certified the monitorial pedagogy as a standard model. Its subsequent international diffusion made it into a weak version of a paradigm of normal science in Thomas Kuhn's sense.⁵³ Those replicating the model in different parts of the world adapted it to fit local circumstances and tried to deal with the practical problems to which it gave rise, such as confronting the expense and technical difficulties involved in providing half-day industrial training.⁵⁴ The pedagogy proved unable to develop the technical, moral and intellectual capacities demanded of workers and citizens under more advanced conditions of capitalist production and nascent liberal democracy and, although some groups clung to it, it had been largely abandoned by about 1840.⁵⁵

As is the case with most other social sciences, pedagogy was and continues to be “multi-paradigmatic”: no single set of epistemological and ontological assumptions or canons of method has ever been entirely dominant. Even in its heyday, monitorial pedagogy had competitors, such as David Stow's Scottish model, or that of Pestalozzi.

Nonetheless, with the organisation of systems of public education in the nineteenth century one sees an important degree of normalisation in pedagogical practice, manifested in the creation of “normal schools” for teacher training and in the proliferation of technical manuals for school management. One of the best certificates of public education as normal science in my reading is Émile Durkheim's lectures to teachers in the philosophy of education and in the details of school management, *Moral Education*.⁵⁶ Historical debates, conflicts and controversies over schooling the people have entirely disappeared in Durkheim's text, where management practices are presented as common sense. There is no longer any question that “the people” are in need of discipline and formation, and public schools are the institutions in which they are to take place. And, like most of the other social sciences, pedagogy is necessarily both in and against state power. But it is the normalisation of practice that makes possible retrospective reconstitutions of a de-politicised science such as Durkheim offered. Just as Thomas Kuhn could investigate the simultaneous discovery of the

⁵³T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd, enlarged ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁵⁴In the case of the Quebec monitorial schools, J.-F. Perrault enlisted out-of-work or broken-down craftsmen and women to offer training, and tried to defray the cost by the sale of student products; J.-F. Perrault, *Cours d'éducation élémentaire à l'usage de l'école gratuite, établie dans la cité de Québec en 1821* (Québec: la Nouvelle imprimerie, 1822). J.-F. Perrault, *Manuel pratique de l'école élémentaire française* (Québec: n.p., 1829).

⁵⁵For a recent discussion of the modification and replacement of the monitorial model, A. Allen, “The Examined Life: On the Formation of Souls and Schooling,” *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 2 (2013): 216–50. For a detailed attack on the phonics common to the method, B. Curtis, “The Speller Expelled: Disciplining the Common Reader in Canada West,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (1985): 346–68. For the rejection of rote learning in Canada, B. Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836–1871* (London, Ontario and Lewes, UK: Althouse Press and Falmer Press, 1988), ch. 3; and *Ruling by Schooling Quebec*, 184, 417–22.

⁵⁶E. Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought. Lectures on the formation and development of secondary education in France* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985). E. Durkheim, *Moral Education* (New York: Free Press, 1961).

principle of the conservation of energy by finding anticipations which “only in view of what happened later” could be said to “deal with the same aspect of nature”,⁵⁷ so Durkheim could present strategies and tactics for governing the schoolroom as simple technical matters.

Notes on contributor

Bruce Curtis, PhD (Toronto), FRHistS, FRSC, is a Professor of Sociology and of History and a Member of the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University in Ottawa Canada. In addition to a number of article-length contributions, his monographs in educational history are: *Ruling by Schooling Quebec: Conquest to Liberal Governmentality. A Historical Sociology* (University of Toronto Press, 2012); *True Government by Choice Men? Inspection, Education and State Formation in Canada West* (University of Toronto Press, 1992); and *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836–1871* (Althouse/Falmer, 1988). He has also published the first historical sociology of census-making in Canada, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840–75* (University of Toronto Press, 2001).

⁵⁷T. J. Kuhn, “Energy Conservation as an Example of Simultaneous Discovery,” in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 66–104, 67.