

The Catechism and the Textbook: The Genealogy of Instructional Interactivity

Martin Luther published both his “greater” catechism for priests and his “lesser” catechism for lay teachers and heads of families in 1529. The lesser catechism, widely popularized in Germany and beyond, was enormously influential as a practical household code, and as Luther intimates, as a “small confessional book, prayer book [and] textbook (*Lehrbüchlein*).” This paper traces the origin of this text and its impact on later educational methods, materials and instructional interactivity, using German and American examples from the 16th to the 21st centuries. I begin by briefly describing the history and nature of the catechism prior to Luther, as well as the context from which Luther’s lesser catechism emerged and the nature of this text itself. This then provides the basis for discussing its impact, including its enormous influence within the Reformation itself, and the theoretical and historical interpretations seeking to explain it.

The Catechism before Luther

What I refer to here as Luther’s shorter, small or Lesser Catechism was christened by Luther his “kleine Katechismus” or in Latin, his *Enchiridion*. Luther’s *kleine Katechismus* was in German, rather than in Latin, and it was to be learned by lay people rather than an educated elite. In this light, it is not surprising that this text has also come to be known as the “layman’s bible.” The word “catechism,” for its part, comes from the Greek *katekhizein*, a term which appears in the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, and denotes much more generically the act of “imparting information” (green), or “teaching orally”—notably *without* connoting a pattern of question and answer. It instead suggests “a sound from above that both imparts and informs” (etymological dictionary, Reu, 1918), placing clear emphasis on the oral and the spoken for a form that, in Luther’s case, appears in *print*.

The catechism certainly had a place in medieval Catholicism. It took the form of a series of statements, through which beginners would learn key Catholic texts such as the *Ave Maria*, the seven deadly sins, and the seven cardinal virtues. These would be learned *not* through the interactivity of question and answer, but by memorizing these statements, for the purposes of confession, of identifying sin. “The *post*-Reformation equivalent,” Green stresses, “was *interrogatory*” (emphasis added). It is no accident, for example, that Luther later used the term “*verhören*,” meaning to examine or interrogate, when he speaks of believers’ faith and training. The Protestant catechism was not about *confessing* sin, but about *professing* faith and belief, and to know by heart what has been called “the sum of saving knowledge.” This is knowledge that was doctrinally conformant, providing guidance for everyday action, and allowing for participation in church liturgy. Finally, for Luther and the Protestants, the catechism also had a performative function: It would be performed by memory, for example, by young people for the entire congregation, or even to test or demonstrate their standing before God.

Now, there were a number of catechisms in the vernacular (i.e. not in Latin) in the early 16th century besides Luther's that also used question and answer, and that had the profession of faith as their principle emphasis. However, Luther's was by far the most influential, and of course, it served as the inspiration for so many other catechism and types of catechizing. As one scholar puts it, "Luther took a literary genre that was just beginning to take shape and put his own stamp on it."

The Lesser Catechism itself

Luther's catechism represents an anthology not only of a range of texts; it also represents a bundling of multiple pedagogical and liturgical functions, and the integration of multiple potential audiences. Luther's lesser catechism brings together the text and interpretation of biblical sources, and also includes a preface by Luther himself. The inclusion and ordering of the first three texts—the Ten Commandments (Decalogue), the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer (*Pater Noster*)—is most deliberate. Luther attributed the greatest power to the first of these; on the one hand, Luther was eager to "awaken" in the believer "full consciousness of his sin" through the recitation of these commandments as the first step towards salvation; on the other, he wanted to emphasize the importance of universal laws given recent peasant uprisings and conflicts.

Indeed it is in one of his sermons on the Decalogue that Luther explained that these Ten Commandments can serve the believer in four ways: "*nemlich als ein lerebüchlin, als ein sangbüchlin, als ein beichtbüchlin, als ein betbüchlin.*" These commandments, together with their explication, in other words, could and also *did* serve as source for song, for confession, prayer and for teaching. "Throughout the Reformation era" as Strauss explains, efforts were made "to turn Luther's catechisms into effective teaching instruments for the young, producing special catechisms for use in schools, turning them into primers, dialogues, hymns set to music... and pictures for the illiterate...." Finally, according to the Grimm dictionary, this description from Luther is the first occurrence of the term for the textbook or Lehrbuch in the German language.

For each of the Ten Commandments, for each of the twelve articles of the Apostles creed, and the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, Luther quotes the original texts, and then asks, "what does this mean?" This is followed by an explanation of one to three sentences for each commandment or article. After these three opening texts, Luther collocates and adapts passages from Paul's instructions from the fifth and sixth chapters of Ephesians to form a section of the catechism known as the *Haustafel* or "tables of duties." *Without* using question and answer, Luther here provides biblical advice all members of a household (husbands, wives, children, masters, and servants, as well as members of society more broadly) on their duties and roles. Returning to the question and answer format, Luther then introduces the basics and meaning of Baptism, confession, as well as communion or the sacrament of the altar, followed by prayers and a set of questions and answers on other points of Christian belief.

At the beginning of all but two of the sections constituting his catechism, Luther says that he has provided it “As the head of the household (*Hausvater*) should” either “pray” or “teach in a simple way.” And although his preface to the catechism is addressed to pastors and preachers, there is much evidence that domestic, family contexts are paramount in this text. [NEXT: haustafel] Indeed, the Lesser Catechism was not only published in book form, [haustafel] but also in the form of tables, placards or “Tafel,” and Luther himself frequently refers to the pages of his catechism in precisely this way. Fixed upon the wall in the home or elsewhere, these “tables” could then be seen and studied by all. Finally, as these examples show, early editions of the catechism contained illustrations showing the fruits both of faith and sin in the most vivid, even graphic way.

In his impassioned preface, Luther lays out his rationale for the catechism, and instructs on its use. First, he explains that it was “the deplorable, miserable condition,” the doctrinal ignorance of “common people” in his native Saxony that “forced” him to publish his catechism. The preacher, Luther says, must

above all be careful to ... choose one form to which he adheres, and which he inculcates all the time, year after year. For young and simple people must be taught by uniform, settled texts and forms, otherwise they easily become confused [and]... all effort and labor is lost... [Pastors should] teach the young and simple people these parts in such a way as not to change a syllable.

For Luther, the power of God’s words, precisely as preserved in biblical texts, was paramount. God for Luther was the *Deus loquens*, the God who speaks, with his Son, Jesus Christ, standing as a kind of “cosmic” word made flesh (Lotz). Luther himself spoke of the need for the word of God to be imprinted, emblazoned, “pressed into the heart, to remain there as a distinguishing sign (malzeichen),” Luther’s emphasis on actual and literal words, on word-by-word recitation, repeated verbatim year after year, by all believers, seems perfectly suited to an era in which the printing press was leaving its infancy, the era of incunabula or *Wiegendruck*, and entering into relative maturity.

Reformation-Era Impact

Although Luther was motivated to write his lesser catechism by the “deplorable conditions” in local Saxony, its effects—like those of his 95 theses—were international and instantaneous. First, Luther presented his catechism as only one of a variety of possible arrangements of key biblical texts, and his prominent example led the way to the appearance of thousands of imitations, both in Germany and abroad: “A veritable explosion of catechism writing took place in Germany during the half-century or so after 1529,” as Gerald Strauss notes, with as many as one in three German-speaking pastors drawing “up a substantial catechism of his own.” Ian Green is particularly careful in showing how this explosion was manifest in England between 1530 and 1740. He lists just over

1000 “new catechisms or catechetical works, or new translations of the same,” in an extensively annotated table.

Luther’s catechism itself was regarded by many as “the most exalted book on earth,” and through translation, it spread not only across Europe, but through the entire hemisphere, as it was then known

from Greenland to Galicia [as one historian of literacy puts it], the catechism was the key to religious education. A Lutheran prayer book and catechism were available in Croatia as early as 1601. Even the eastern Orthodox church, to which the catechetical form had been unknown in the medieval period, produced one in Polish and Church Slavonic in 1645.

Translations of the lesser catechism were a key instrument for the conversion of native populations in the new world. A translation into the language of the Delaware Indians was completed by 1656. It was also “the main weapon in the hands of Hans Egede, an evangelical preacher who worked to convert and educate the Eskimo subjects of the Danish crown in Greenland after 1721.” Toward the end of the 17th century, as Reu explains, Luther’s catechism was found “in Danish, English ... Estonian, French, Hebrew, Icelandic, Italian, Lett, Lithuanian, Latin, Dutch, Old-Prussian” and many more languages.

Historians have provided various explanations for the remarkable developments unfolding in the wake of Luther’s “textbook.” Many see in the catechism a text and a genre uniquely suited to the needs of the age, particularly the need for stability in the face of widespread unrest that had unfolded in the years prior. Whereas broadsheets and other printed religious documents had earlier fomented conflict and unrest, the catechism represented a printed product whose goal was stability and conformity. “The whole point of the catechism,” Strauss emphasizes, is “that it was *safe*.”

Repeating set phrases rooted the basic religious tenets in the minds of the masses and, by stressing the religious basis of civic obligation, its use strengthened the social order. The potentially disruptive influence of reading the Bible and of independent thought was substantially reduced.

As mentioned above, the catechism also represented at times an orchestrated performance, an impressive affirmation and confirmation of communal consensus, as Strauss further explains:

the spectacle of public catechism recitations [represented] a kind of communal declaration of loyalty, in which the young set a salutary example for the adult congregation. When schoolchildren in Württemberg stood up in two facing ranks, antiphonally intoning questions and answers from the catechism, the intended effect

must have been that of a cultic affirmation and rededication of the entire community to the established order.

This communal affirmation and rededication can also be seen as tantamount to a guarantee of communal salvation. Luther's catechism, in other words, is much more than just a book: it can be said to also represent a means of bringing to life the freedom and belief of catechants. It provides a set of images and written instructions, all showing vibrantly the horrors of a sinful life and the order that should prevail at home, in school, at work and in the church.

Luther's Catechism in Theory

Some have interpreted the power and success of Luther's catechism in socio-technical and systems-theoretical terms. Two recent books in particular, Andrew Pettigrew's 2016 *Brand Luther* and Marcus Sandl's 2011 *Medialität und Ereignis: Eine Zeitgeschichte der Reformation* are considered here. As discussed above, God's word for Luther was not something to be intoned in liturgical Latin, or preserved and parsed through scribal and scholastic experts. Although Luther greatly valued the word of God in its inerrant, universal objectivity, he saw its consummation in its heartfelt profession by the individual believer, in its being particularized and subjectivized. He saw this as being achieved not only through its word-by-word recitation, but through particular grammatical transpositions. Instead of being reiterated in the form of generalized third-person, past-tense formulations, it should be professed, he believed, by the believer in the first person and in the present tense. The preacher, as Luther says,

does not just say: "Christ is born," but he appropriates Christ's birth for us and says: "Your Savior." Thus the gospel does not merely teach the story and words of Christ, but personalizes them to all who believe in it" (LW 52.20 Lotze).

Although a transposition to the first person singular was not undertaken consistently in Luther's own catechisms, it is central to the *Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563 (see: Ian Green, 20). Also using sophisticated typographic cueing to link its wording to biblical sources, this text begins as follows: "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" "Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ..."

This method, and Luther's larger project to "change the human personality" through pedagogical and propagandistic conditioning has attracted the interest of political and social theorists, for example Louis Althusser, a teacher of Michel Foucault. Althusser used the example of religious confessional language and recitation to develop a concept or process that is central to contemporary analyses of political hegemony and the formation of the contemporary subject.

This is the process of “interpellation,” in which political subjects substitute their name or identity in the place of a generalized “I” or “you.” A text like the Ten Commandments, Althusser says,

calls individuals by their names, [*thou shalt not*] thus recognizing that they are always already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity... it interpellates them in such a way that the subject responds: ‘*Yes; it really is me!*’ [and] it obtains from it the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence.

When advertising attempts to address you directly, telling you to “just do it” or to “be all you can be,” it is using the same technique that Althusser identifies here, and that Luther in effect saw as the consummation of God’s own words. In this sense, Luther’s approach can indeed be seen as establishing a kind of “Brand Luther”—a faint echo of modern branding exercises. In his 2011 *Mediality and Event: A Contemporary History of the Reformation*, Marcus Sandl explains that in early Protestantism “the self-expression of a word become flesh, its dematerialization, allow[ed] for the formation of a horizon, in which the words from the past again can unfold in their original power” (320). The word not only becomes flesh and dwells among us, but simultaneously, it is universalized and internalized by God’s human subjects. By thus turning the objective word into dematerialized, spoken, subjectified form, the catechism stands at a powerful point of juncture between unerringly efficient material preservation of the printing press, and proclamation and vivification of subjective belief. This is a process or site that other efforts to proselytize and propagandize have since strenuously struggled to claim, leverage and hold.

Luther’s Catechism and Education Today

As made clear above, variants of the catechism proliferated widely and were used well into the 18th century. They were employed not only to inculcate religious values and doctrine into a young audience, but were also used to foster and model a safe type of “literacy.” Ann-Marie Chartier explains that “From texts already known by heart... the teacher made children break down words by making them spell the letters and pronounce the syllables.” In such a context, Chartier emphasizes “learning to pray and learning to read were the same thing!”

The catechism gradually also came to present a kind of template for mass schooling in subjects *other* than prayer and confession. In America, one person in particular is celebrated as having given a “secular catechism to the nation-state.” This is lexicographer and language reformer Noah Webster (1758-1843), who was also

perhaps America's most successful [textbook] author of the last half of the eighteenth century. Part II of Webster's (1783) *Grammatical institute of the English language* couched all of its definitions in question and answer format.

However, by the turn of the 18th century, the catechism was increasingly under attack by luminaries such as Herder and Schleiermacher in Prussia, and by no less than Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelly in Britain

One educator, who was declared a kind of Luther figure in his own right, was particularly harsh in his criticism, specifically of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This was the Pietist-educated pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi [NEXT], who lamented to his readers that

In all catechizing the child is fettered, partly by the limits of the precise idea about which he is catechized, partly by the form in which he is catechized, and lastly, but certainly, by the limits of the teacher's knowledge... Friend! What terrible barriers for the child, that have been wholly removed by my method.

The method which Pestalozzi speaks of here is his *inductive* method, one that preserves the presence of word, call-and-response, belief and confirmation from the catechism, but also radically re-configures it. As the word “induction” implies, Pestalozzi’s famous method worked by moving the child logically from the subjective, individual and tangible world of the senses to the more abstract, categorical and general world of the mind.

For Pestalozzi, the self and its life in the sensual world are not irreparably fallen –to be raised up only through the impression of God’s word on the heart. Instead, that which is within the self, and that which is above all sensual, is *good*, and serves as the foundation for all further teaching and learning.

Pestalozzi’s inductive method is realized in the form of questions in textbooks that ask the student about what they see, hear and sense in the world around them. The responses of students to these questions does not happen through scripted catechetical responses, but through the student’s own words, through a kind of speaking for and with oneself. In this way, the student is seen as leading him or herself independently to the logically or inductively correct response. This method was adapted to the widest range of subjects, from grammar to geography—even beyond the point of the exhaustion of its possibilities and advantages.

Today, the inductive method makes up an important part of an arsenal of instructional techniques that include the question and answer format of old catechetical texts. These are all marshalled, in today’s instructional materials. It is with an example of one of these combinations of questions, interpellations and subjectifications that I conclude my paper. It consists of an initial page from an *Introduction to Psychology* textbook. [SLIDE: PAGE] This one simple page provide examples suggestive not only of inductive questioning, it also offers authoritative quotations and

even uses forms of interpellation reminiscent of Luther's ideas of the personalization of the gospel. Of course, the opening page of this psychology text does not exactly begin by asking about one's only "comfort in life and death," it positions the reader in a complex and sometimes mysterious material cosmology [NEXT]:

On the scale of outer space, we are less than a single grain of sand on all the oceans' beaches, and our lifetime but a relative nanosecond. Yet there is nothing more awe inspiring and absorbing than our own inner space.

The page uses the interpellating pronouns "we," "our" and "you" no fewer than 17 times to further situate the reader in this cosmology. It does so, moreover, with the explicit promise that a dispassionate and material psychological science can shed light on these mysteries and complexities. It also provides vivid images not of sinful transgressions, but of the universal phenomenon of the human smile, and poses for its young readers questions that are to be addressed through inductive exploration. It asks for example: "Have you ever found yourself reacting to something as one of your biological parents would... and then wondering how much of your personality you inherited?" In this way, this opening page poses a central problem of psychology. This is "nature versus nurture."

Indeed, this page asks no fewer than six questions of this kind of its readers. From the immediacy and universality of the human smile through to prompts about one's own family and culture, the form and content of this page can be said to work together to create a rich, interactive learner experience. It does this, moreover, specifically by presenting of some of the oldest and most established themes or "doctrine" in the discipline of psychology. In this way, this textbook can be said to strive to a kind of transformation rather similar to the one sought by Luther: This is the metamorphosis of universality and authority of the objective word into a dematerialized, internalized and subjectified form. It is a transition from the preservation and proliferation made possible by the printed word into a personalized pedagogical performance. The "unprecedented" educational project of the Protestant Reformation, epitomized in Luther's catechism provides clearly recognizable precursors for some of today's most refined and widespread instructional efforts—and laid the groundwork for many more.