

“Talking to the Whole Wide World” and Montessori Foreign Language Education

Penny Vos, March 2012

“Talking to the Whole Wide World” looks a lot more like a book than a Montessori resource. Books are overused in mainstream languages education and Montessori teachers are right to regard them with suspicion. Having said that, this is no ordinary book.

It was written by a Montessori teacher and mother, so the educational understandings which shaped “Talking to the Whole World” from the beginning are inherently Montessori, even before the creation of the Montessori Materials CD.

Let me explain, with the help of Michael Olaf’s “SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF MONTESSORI PHILOSOPHY ON WHICH THE EDUCATIONAL METHOD IS BASED”, which I found on the internet, and which seems a fair sort of summary of the main features of Montessori education.

I’ll address these elements in no particular order, and use the abbreviation T3W3 for “Talking to the Whole Wide World”:

Multi-aged groupings and individuality:

The T3W3 course is designed to accommodate individuals. It contains a continuum of concepts and an assortment of relevant learning activities which a teacher or student can select from, to make the best combination for a class, a group or an individual. It is **not** expected that every song will be sung, every word memorized, every game played, every creative application applied nor every joke appreciated by every member of a multi-aged class, but that those appropriate will be selected for use.

As Olaf says of Montessori, “*All intelligences and styles of learning—musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, intuitive, natural, and the traditional linguistic and logical-mathematical—are nurtured and respected.*” and this is also true of the multistrategic approach of T3W3.

It is left to the teacher to decide whether to present it all in sequence, at whatever pace that requires, or whether to adopt a spiralling treatment whereby the child absorbs some of what is available to be learned in the first pass and more on the second, and so on.

The role of the teacher:

Michael Olaf says, of the Montessori teacher, “*She is facile in the basic lessons of math, language, the arts and sciences, and in guiding a child's research and exploration, capitalizing on interests and excitement about a subject.*”

To this I would only add that the teacher can soon be equally facile in the basic lessons of foreign (or comparative) language learning, and as well equipped to guide exploration in that field.

T3W3 contains both all that the teacher needs to know about language (the audio CD is essential here), and about language teaching in an environment where we understand that learning is about exploration and achievement and capability and fun. In the first year this is new challenge for the teacher, but this is a passing stage, and guiding children through their new language soon becomes a comparable responsibility with that in other areas of learning.

Completeness:

T3W3 contains the entire language of Esperanto, by far the simplest language in the World’s Top 100. By that I mean that it presents, explains and gives opportunities to apply every one of the 16 rules of grammar (which have no exceptions) and all of the official word-building elements used in normal speech (but not technical and scientific specialties). It does not formally teach all of the root-words that are used in normal speech, but equips the learner to use a dictionary where needed and to ask for help from others, in the course of using the language.

The completeness of the course is vitally important because a child’s intrinsic motivation to achieve practical competence is an indispensable part of Montessori Education. Offering a course which will deliver a fraction of a language is like offering a chance to sit on a bike. It might be sort of nice, but it is nothing like riding one.

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Michael Olaf, says:

There are three stages of learning:

(Stage 1) introduction to a concept by means of a lecture, lesson, something read in a book, etc.

(Stage 2) processing the information, developing an understanding of the concept through work, experimentation, creation.

(Stage 3) "knowing", to possessing an understanding of, demonstrated by the ability to pass a test with confidence, to teach another, or to express with ease.

So mastery is an essential stage of learning which must be part of our plan.

Indirect Preparation and The Prepared Environment:

As Olaf points out, Montessori educators accept responsibility for analyzing the steps of learning any concept to be offered to the child. “*A child is always learning something that is indirectly preparing him to learn something else*”, exactly as learning Esperanto is indirectly preparing the child to learn other languages, and indeed formal English, much more easily than would otherwise have been possible.

This apprenticeship language learning effect has been observed in several formal studies around the world, as well as in much broader practical experience. More information is available [here](#).

Olaf continues “*It is the role of the teacher to prepare and continue to adapt the environment, to link the child to it through well-thought-out lessons, and to facilitate the child's exploration and creativity... There must be just the right amount of educational materials to allow for the work of the child.*”

Reducing clutter is one way that Montessori educators create an environment conducive to success, and a focus on one - emphatically uncluttered- first foreign language, is just such an executive decision.

Teaching Method:

Michael Olaf says, “*There are no text books, and seldom will two or more children be studying the same thing at the same time.*”, and this is also true of the T3W3 program.

The book is for the teacher, and the materials available to the children do not include anything as prescriptive as a textbook, workbook or series of photocopied handouts.

The children may have notes that they have written themselves, cards to handle, research challenges to pursue, songs to sing, a blank wordbook to collect words in, some computer-based practice games, pen-friends to talk to, but there is nothing to tell the child what reading level is expected of him or her, or how much s/he is expected to write, or when they should stop work.

Olaf says, “*Children learn directly from the environment, and from other children—rather than from the teacher.*”

This is entirely compatible with the design of T3W3, starting as soon as the class has learning to share.

The Schedule:

Michael Olaf highlights the 3-hour work period as an essential feature of the Montessori prepared environment:

“*There is at least one 3-hour period of uninterrupted, work time each day, not broken up by required group lessons or lessons by specialists.*”

Integrating a first fluent foreign language into the prepared environment reduces the pressure to impinge upon this 3-hour period, as well as to limit a child's access to his or her new language by dependence on a specialist who is usually absent.

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Areas of Study Linked:

Olaf observes that *“All subjects are interwoven; history, art, music, math, astronomy, biology, geology, physics, and chemistry are not isolated from each other and a child studies them in any order he chooses, moving through all in a unique way for each child. At any one time in a day all subjects—math, language, science, history, geography, art, music, etc.—are being studied, at all levels.”*

As Montessori questioned current practice, to distinguish between what is done deliberately and wisely, and what is done from habit, necessity or parsimony, we can ask why foreign language is not included in these lists.

Is it better that children should learn foreign languages in the same hour(s) each week, all in one class? From the specialist teacher? From a book, or on handouts?

Well, no. We have often done it that way because we didn’t have a better alternative, but now we do - a way to bring a second language into the Montessori classroom where it belongs.

In addition, studying Esperanto promotes greater connection between geography and languages because children must learn about all of our world, not just the part associated with one traditional target language. Esperanto provides intercultural contacts with children in over 100 countries, with both parties experiencing the challenge and success of being able to meet “in the middle”.

Assessment:

Michael Olaf explains the Montessori approach to assessment:

“There are no grades, or other forms of reward or punishment, subtle or overt. Assessment is by portfolio and the teacher’s observation and record keeping. The real test of whether or not the system is working lies in the accomplishment and behavior of the children, their happiness, maturity, kindness, and love of learning, concentration, and work.”

T3W3 is designed to be assessed in these ways.

Character Education and Valorization:

One of Montessori’s biggest contributions to education was to link the broadest vision and the highest goals to the practicalities of the child’s learning day. All of those days, for all of those children, add up to create a reality which is much more than rhetoric.

Montessori cared about accommodating the human tendencies to *“explore, move, share with a group, to be independent and make decisions, create order, develop self-control, abstract ideas from experience, use the creative imagination, work hard, repeat, concentrate, and perfect one’s efforts.”* (Olaf’s List)

You will find many such opportunities in the T3W3 learning journey.

Finally, Olaf summarizes, *“Opportunities for the valorization of the personality are considered at least as important as academic education. Children are given the opportunity to take care of themselves, each other, and the environment.”*

Esperanto is uniquely valuable in this respect. It provides an opportunity for children to see themselves as wise, just and capable participants in a practical strategy for global harmony through communication.

Conclusion:

I hope that this illuminates the bone-deep Montessori-ness of a strategy and resource which, superficially, may not appear so.