

JOHNNY BOSCO'S COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

A theory-guided study of Don Bosco's autobiographical anecdotes: 1825-1835

Peter Gonsalves

Salesianum 77 (2015) 127-163

The view that educators are communicators may seem self-evident. The complex task of educating involves teaching, transmitting, elucidating, guiding, caring, accompanying, anticipating, correcting, evaluating, encouraging, inspiring, leading... each of which is a dynamic, inter-relational communication process. It is a fact that any theory of education contains an implicit theory of communication, just as many communication theories are relevant to education. Acceptable though this may seem, would it not be yet another truism to state that effective educators *communicate* effectively? We would require proof from communication experts to be able to validate this claim. Unfortunately, sufficient theories on education by communication scholars are conspicuously absent.¹

Therefore, a study on a nineteenth century saint-educator *as communicator* is worth attempting. Better known across the world as Don Bosco, he is admired for his method of educating young people especially those who were marginalised. However, not many of his own adherents realise that he might have been far less effective as an educator were it not for his enthusiasm to express himself through a variety of personal gifts and social

¹ James SHANAHAN, "Learning and Communication", in S. W. LITTLEJOHN – K. A. FOSS, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theories*, Sage Publications, California, 2009, 596.

communication skills. If, as we have stated above, he was an educator and *therefore* a communicator, this article attempts to transcend the obvious by claiming that he was an effective educator *because* he communicated effectively.² In stating this, we would like to place the emphasis on Don Bosco's communication competence without diluting in any way the indisputable privilege he enjoys as a competent educator who is esteemed, imitated and venerated around the globe.

To demonstrate this, we have chosen to begin by concentrating on his boyhood years – the dawning of that exuberance which would transcend boundaries of family, friends, relatives, neighbourhood, and later, would extend to the city of Turin, to the rest of Italy, to Europe and finally to the entire world. This *original surge of self-expression* will be the focus of our study. Concretely, we refer to the time between 1825 and 1835, from the age of 10 to 20. Historian, Pietro Braido calls these years the period when the “*nucleus* of Don Bosco's educative vocation is constituted and evolves [...]”.³ We consider this period worth examining from a communication perspective because it was undoubtedly the nursery that sprouted and gave impetus for the flourishing of nearly fifty-three years of prolific communication activity directed towards educational and pastoral goals, such as, *educating* the young and the poor, *publishing* wholesome literature, *disseminating* the Salesian charism across the world, or *liaising* between the Catholic Church and protagonists of the Italian Unification Movement. Don Bosco's pastoral concern through creative communication was well expressed in his iconic statement: “In the things that are of advantage to young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God *I run ahead even to the point of temerity*”.⁴

The primary text of our study will be Don Bosco's unfinished autobiography entitled *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales* (henceforth *Memoirs* or *MO*).⁵ It was written in obedience to Pope Pius IX. Don Bosco

² A recognition of the communicative dimension of Don Bosco's educational method had been elaborated in the historical study by Marco BONGIOANNI, *Sac. Gio Bosco, comunicatore educatore*, Collana DB 88, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma, 1989.

³ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, 138, (trans. & italics mine).

⁴ *Memorie Biografiche*, XIV, 662.

⁵ John BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales 1815 to 1855*, (Trans. Daniel Lyons, SDB), Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle 2006, xv. (Henceforth *Memoirs* or *MO*) The *Memoirs of the Oratory* (MO) is not to be confused with the twenty-volume *Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco*. (Henceforth *BM*). Throughout this paper

first met him in 1858 in view of setting in motion the process of founding the Salesian Society. The Pope was particularly enthused to hear that this initiative took its inspiration from the dream that Don Bosco had at the age of nine. He strongly advised him to write it down and to include similar events of a supernatural nature for the benefit of the thousands who would one day become its members. Thanks to the Pope's insistence⁶ and Don Bosco's obedience, we have today an extremely valuable text that is laden with rich anecdotal information penned by Don Bosco himself. In some instances, it is "the *only source* from which we know particular episodes of his life or how he understood certain events".⁷

While writing his *Memoirs* – which was rewritten at different times between 1873 and 1879 – Don Bosco kept the audience suggested by Pius IX firmly in mind. It was to be a document addressed only to members of the Salesian Society (which was officially approved by the same Pope in 1869).⁸ He wrote it to prepare them for future challenges in their pastoral and educational mission to the young so that in re-visiting their past, they would recognise, appreciate and make known "how God himself has always been

we will refer to the above mentioned English edition of the *MO* unless specified otherwise.

⁶ Don Bosco never thought of writing his autobiography, nor did he desire it. In the preface to the *MO* he confesses: "I found it hard actually to set about the task because it meant too often speaking about myself." He tried to postpone it and was chided for doing so by the Pope who had inquired about its progress. On finally producing an incomplete version he did not publish it and forbade his Salesians to do so. To read more on the story behind how the *MO* came to be written and published see Michael Mendl's, "Introduction to the English Edition", *MO*, New Rochelle, 2006, xv-xxxiv; or the Italian introduction by Aldo Giraudo, "L'importanza storica e pedagogico-spirituale delle Memorie dell'Oratorio", in *Giovanni Bosco, Memorie dell'oratorio di s. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, LAS, Roma, 2011, 5-49.

⁷ *MO*, xv.

⁸ See, "Preface", *MO*, xliii. Although it was Don Bosco's express will that it was not to be published, excerpts of the *MO*, appeared in the Salesian Bulletin during his lifetime. After he was canonised in 1934, it was felt that he had become a universally known, and therefore, historically important personality to be studied by historians of the future. Thus the first complete edition of the *MO* appeared in 1946. Fr. E. Ceria one of his biographers used Don Bosco's own words to suggest that the *MO* be published. Don Bosco's desire was that all must know that everything we ever did for the congregation was with the intervention of God and "God's intervention must be made manifest." Ceria also used the fact that two years after he wrote it Don Bosco himself was revising it and making it available to Fr. Bonetti for the *Salesian Bulletin*. Cf. *MO*, xviii.

our guide”.⁹ In the words of Pietro Stella, he wished to instil in his Salesians the conviction that his whole life was “a fabric of previously arranged events, of things that became reality due to Divine wisdom”.¹⁰

The legitimacy of autobiographical research in a scientific work

An autobiography is the story of one’s life-experiences. It is not a mere recounting of facts in chronological order within their contexts. It is a first-person narration and interpretation of life seen in retrospect from a holistic perspective. While it does include historical evidence, the data it offers are often soaked in personal anecdotes and opinions. Given this reality, one may call into question the relevance of Don Bosco’s *Memoirs* as an adequate point of departure for an academic study on his communication competence. Can a work based on an autobiography be deemed scientific?

Positivistic researchers think not. They consider this interpretative approach to truth lacking in objectivity. The more detached from human subjectivity, the more scientific the analysis is. This is why they disqualify autobiographical writing as a valid form of data-collection in scientific inquiry.

Postmodern scholars, however, look at the issue differently. They appreciate the value of narratives based on lived experiences because personal histories are an essential part of socio-cultural contexts. According to them, narrative inquiry is capable of penetrating the interiority of life-histories in order to discover the warmth of meaning that participants can bring to their interpretation of cold data. Purely objective procedures of data collection are incapable of gathering the wealth of in-depth knowledge intrinsic to human relationships.

The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is concretely experienced reality and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience; external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and reflection [...]. Autobiography [therefore] presuppo-

⁹ “Preface”, *MO*, xliii.

¹⁰ Cf. P. STELLA, “Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità Cattolica”. III: *La canonizzazione*, 16; cited in Aldo GIRAUDO (Ed.), *Giovanni Bosco – Memorie dell’Oratorio*, in LAS, Roma, 2011, 11. See also: MENDL, “Don Bosco’s Preface to the Memoirs”, in *MO*, p. xliii.

ses a writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important.¹¹

For this reason postmodernists consider the autobiographical method of inquiry scientifically legitimate. It is appreciated both, in its own right as an understanding of human significance, and in its complementary role as filling out the gaps in scientific inquiry.¹²

Having reinstated the credibility of autobiographical writing, how do we proceed to interpret the text of Don Bosco's *Memoirs*? Aldo Giraudo suggests that we begin by opting for the standard point of departure – “the literary sense of the text, that provides the base on which other interpretative readings can be articulated. The criterion of textual coherence needs to be respected when comparing the interpretative conjectures”.¹³ Procedurally, this would mean that our hermeneutical stance is humanistic objectivity through which, both, the historical and the symbolical nature of the narrative is evaluated and analysed.

With regard to the historical quality of the *Memoirs*, we must take into consideration the circumstances under which Don Bosco writes. The experience he recounts through lively anecdotes is being written nearly *forty years after* they actually occurred. As far as details are concerned these accounts are bound to be lacking in historical accuracy. This is why the critical notes that accompany the text serve as important guidelines for our study – for which we owe historians a debt of gratitude.¹⁴

The symbolic structure of the text, on the other hand, consists of language intended to convey the meaning of the author *at the time of writing*

¹¹ K. WEINTRAUB, “Autobiography and historical consciousness”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1, 1975, 822-823, cited by FREEMAN, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry”, 128.

¹² Cf. Mark FREEMAN, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry”, in D. J. CLANDININ, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry – Mapping a Methodology*, Sage, London 2006, 120.

¹³ Aldo GIRAUDO, “Importanza storica e pedagogico-spirituale delle memorie dell'oratorio” in *Giovanni Bosco, Memorie dell'oratorio di s. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, LAS, Roma 2011, 33. (trans. mine).

¹⁴ This work is deeply indebted to the historical notes of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* that appear in various editions by historians such as Francis Desramaut (1962), Antonio da Silva Ferreira (1991) and Aldo Giraudo (2011).

the autobiography. The retrospective look at one's own history offers the chance to step back and survey the larger picture. The experience is inevitably laden with nostalgia and is bound to find aureate expression in words, phrases, figures of speech, which may not correspond to the sense and sentiment the author might have had at that precise moment in history. Furthermore, autobiographical writers are fully aware of their particular readership (even if, in the long run, their intended and real readership may differ). They consciously or subconsciously select and tailor the narrative to construct the self-image they wish to project.¹⁵ Here, it is worth presenting the collection of Braido's statements selected by the editors of the *Fonti Salesiane* on Don Bosco's intention while writing the *Memoirs*.

Don Bosco shows that he is inspired 'by the primary concern of defining the meaning of an overall educational experience' and formulating 'a programme of action' for his disciples. 'Before being a story of the past ... the Memoirs are the result of coherent reflection, ending up in a spirituality and pedagogy.' Thus the Memoirs become 'a History of the Oratory' which is more 'theological and pedagogical than real.'¹⁶

Thus the combined historico-symbolic content of Don Bosco's autobiographical writing – besides being an extremely valuable patrimony to the entire Salesian Family – makes it an immensely valuable object of communication research. To remind the reader of this dual perspective within the limited scope of our paper we will make a distinction between 'Don Bosco', the author of the *Memoirs* writing nearly forty years after the events have occurred, and 'John Bosco' or simply 'Johnny', the youthful character of 1825-1835 who is being written about. Hopefully, this distinction will help readers remember that the young John Bosco – the focus of this article – is not only the historical John of the 1830s but also a blend of the reconstructed Johnny of Don Bosco's memory. It is a tool we will be using to keep the blend of the historical and the symbolical before the mind's eye of the reader.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Jones HOLMAN, "Autoethnography: Making the personal political", in N. K. DENZIN & Y. S. LINCOLN (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2005, 763-791.

¹⁶ FRANCESCO MOTTO – JOSÉ M. PRELLEZO – ALDO GIRAUDO (Edd.), *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1170-1171.

Thus, the anecdotal evidence that we will be employing to underscore the communication competence of the young John Bosco will serve as a welcome bridge. A *ponte* to connect the educational and pastoral dynamism of Don Bosco in his place and time with our communication-driven twenty-first century world in this bicentenary year of his birth.

The advantages of a theory-guided analysis

Presuming that the legitimacy of autobiographical research of the *Memoirs* is acceptable, we now proceed to consider the method of examining the effectiveness of Don Bosco's communication through anecdotes of his early life. Here again we run up against a challenge. Which type of communication is 'effective'? There is no *ideal* way to communicate in any given situation. An effective response in one context might be a complete failure in another. Successful communication can depend on how one communicates while keeping in mind a variety of factors, such as proximity, status, situation, culture, power, values, beliefs, and so on. But it defies all efforts at establishing one standard of efficiency applicable to all contexts.

This is why John Wiemann's proposal to judge communication efficiency by measuring 'communication competence' is useful. According to him, communication competence may be defined as

the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviours in order that he may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation.¹⁷

This definition implies that people consciously or unconsciously have certain *goals* when entering into a communication relationship with others. The situations in which interactions occur may or may not favour the *fulfilment* of their goals. Those who succeed in fulfilling their goals while still maintaining a positive relationship are said to be competent commu-

¹⁷ John WIEMANN, et al., "The Relational Model of Communication Competence", in Branislav KOVACIC, *Emerging Theories of Human Communication*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, 25.

nicators. Wiemann's definition that measures efficiency by projecting goals and positively achieving them is definitely applicable to our study on John Bosco's competence as a communicator.

However, our definition of communication competence cannot rest on a merely functional or operational level. We need to look deeper. A holistic definition of competence that deals with the personality of the communicator (and not merely with the efficiency of the output) is provided by the UK based, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).¹⁸ It distinguishes the terms 'competency'/'competencies' from the terms 'competence'/'competences' as follows:

'Competency' and 'competencies' may be defined as the behaviours (and, where appropriate, technical attributes) that individuals must have, or must acquire, to perform effectively at work – that is, the terms focus on the personal attributes or inputs of the individual. 'Competence' and 'competences' are broader concepts that encompass demonstrable performance outputs as well as behaviour inputs, and may relate to a system or set of minimum standards required for effective performance at work.¹⁹

While the CIPD definition of 'competence' partly matches the performance-based meaning presented by Wiemann, it also includes the concept of 'competency' which emphasises personal skills. Competence includes competency. As demonstrated in the definition itself, a person's competence that is measured by his work output can only be possible if inputs of competencies or skills are taken into consideration. This article will therefore embrace both meanings under the term 'competence'. We will discuss Don Bosco's perception of his early behaviour skills and personal attributes (competencies) that influenced his successful performance (competence) as a young communicator. Put differently, to study the young John Bosco's communication competence it is enough to look at the communication

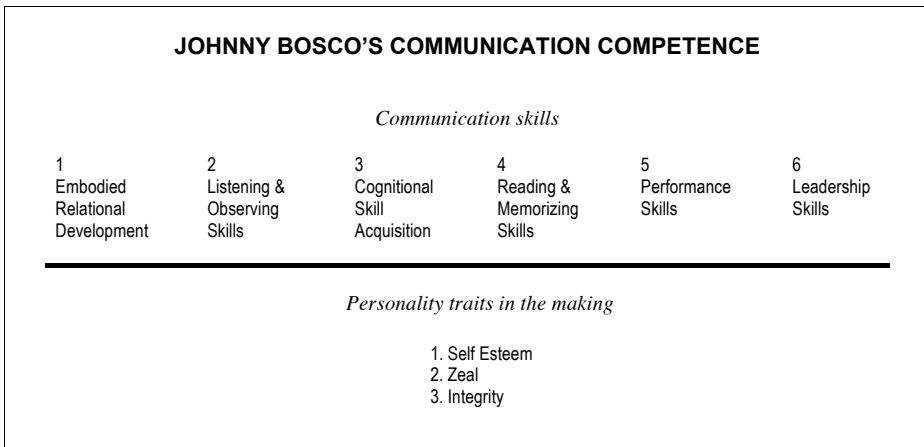
¹⁸ The CIPD is the professional body for Human Resource and "people development [...] committed to championing better work and working lives for the benefit of individuals, business, the economies and society." It has over 135,000 members internationally. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), "About us", in: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/cipd-hr-profession/about-us/default.aspx> (23-12-2014).

¹⁹ CIPD, "Competence and competency frameworks" in: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/competence-competency-frameworks.aspx> (23-12-2014).

competencies described in various anecdotes of his life and their successful impact through the positive evaluation he received from the interactants in the anecdotes.

On reading the *Memoirs* in this light, we have identified six prominent competencies and three evolving personality traits that fostered the development of his early communication competence. They former include: embodied relational skills, listening and observing skills, cognitional skill acquisition, reading and memorization skills, performance skills and leadership skills. The three personality traits that animated his interaction through the above competencies are self-esteem, zeal and integrity. (See diagram below)

These lists are only a selection and are not meant to be exhaustive. In drawing them up, we have no intention of merely correlating anecdotal data thematically. Our aim is to deepen our interpretation by reading the data with the help of brief theoretical inputs. Given the spatial limitations of this article we will appropriately select *only certain relevant aspects* of a few classical theories from the sciences of sociology, psychology and communication. Thus, while putting theories to the test on the strength of their applicability beyond their original frames of reference, we will also enrich our interpretation of the anecdotes with fresh insights on Don Bosco's presentation of Johnny Bosco's competence as a communicator.



A) *Communication skills***1. Embodied relational development**

Since much of our study has to do with Don Bosco's description of his early relational behaviour, it is best to begin with the field of nonverbal communication with an emphasis on embodiment. Mark Knapp (1938) demonstrates that "initial forces of attraction in a relationship may be sparked by physical attributes, yet the way in which a person communicates during an interaction also plays a substantial role in attraction and relational development."²⁰ Let us pursue these two essential aspects in our anecdotal study: physical and interactional qualities as determinants in building relationships.

Don Bosco made no secret of his extraordinary talents. He begins the third chapter of his *Memoirs* by candidly telling us about one of his rare gifts at the age of ten. "When I looked closely at someone, I could usually gauge what he was thinking. This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys of my own age, and I was thus in demand as judge or friend".²¹ The character of the boy John seems conscious and confident of his physical and psychological prowess. "I was strong and brave enough to stand up even to older companions".²²

A second example of Don Bosco's awareness of his personal charm as a boy is evident in his description of his first meeting with Fr Calosso on his way home from church.²³ Fr Calosso "noticed a capless, curly-headed lad amidst the others but walking in complete silence. He looked me over and then began to talk with me".²⁴ When Johnny shared his desire to be a priest because, "*I'd like to attract my companions, talk to them, and teach them our religion*",²⁵ Fr Calosso – Don Bosco recalls – was enchanted. "These bold

²⁰ Mark KNAPP – Anita VANGELISTI, "Relationship stages: A communication Perspective" in Kathleen M. GALVIN, *Making Connections, Readings in Relational Communication*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 151-158.

²¹ *MO*, 17.

²² *MO*, 17.

²³ Don Bosco dates this episode as April 1826. Historians think the encounter actually took place when he was fourteen. Cf. *MO*, 25, fn 11.

²⁴ *MO*, 22.

²⁵ *MO*, 22, (*italics mine*).

words impressed the holy priest. *He never took his eyes off me while I was speaking*".²⁶

A third example of the heightened awareness of his own physical charm can be seen in an incident that occurred when Johnny was eighteen. It was a period when his need for recognition and affection was being amply rewarded through a display of physical, intellectual and leadership skills. His physical features were clearly a dominant predictor in forming new friends – a fact that can be borne out in the kinship he shared with Jonah, a Jewish boy who was his peer and classmate in humanities.

He was about eighteen, was remarkably good looking, and had an exceptionally fine singing voice. He was a good billiards player too. We met at Elijah's bookstore, and he would always ask for me as soon as he came into the shop. I liked him a lot, and *he was very attached to me*. Every spare minute he had, he spent in my room; we sang together, played the piano, or read. He liked to hear the thousand little stories I used to tell.²⁷

The warmth and charm that Johnny emanated when he was with Jonah – or in the interaction with his companions and Fr Calosso – must have manifested a rich variety of physical attributes. We interpret some of them in the light of the list outlined by Knapp: Johnny's smile, curly hair, eye contact, signs of interest, ease at engaging in conversation, childlike expressions and liveliness. No less attractive may have been his unassuming display of speech, intelligence and memory, manifested by the accuracy of content and the manner of delivery.²⁸ The communication effectiveness of the encounter and the appropriateness of the conversation in the three instances above enabled goals to be met and relationships to be strengthened. It is difficult to say to what extent Don Bosco's adult self-concept was being projected onto his youthful autobiographical self. Nevertheless, his youthful

²⁶ *MO*, 22, (italics mine).

²⁷ *MO*, 58, (italics mine).

²⁸ KNAPP – VANGELISTI, "Relationship stages", 151-158. Irwin Alan and Dalmis Taylor's social penetration theory is one of the most well-known explanations for how self-disclosure defines relationships; it states that self-disclosure can be conceptualised along three dimensions: (1) depth, which reflects how personal the disclosure is; (2) breadth, which refers to the number of topics discussed; and (3) frequency, or how often the disclosure occurs.

embodied communication comes across to the reader as relationally congenial, affectionate and attractive from the very start.

2. Listening and observing skills

It should not take us long to realise that at ten years of age Johnny, the central character of the first part of Don Bosco's *Memoirs*, was a keen listener. Barely three chapters into the work one learns that he could repeat the sermons or catechism lessons he had heard only once. The sharing of his faith, we are told, was the substance and purpose of his desire to gather people together in an attractive way.

But it was to hear my stories that they flocked around me. They loved them to the point of folly. I drew on many sources for my anecdotes – sermons, catechism lessons, and stories I had read [...]. The poor speaker [himself] used to stand on a bench so that all could hear and see. These occasions were described as ‘listening’ to a sermon.²⁹

How was he able to remember sermons so well? His alertness to what he had heard was probably due to the fact that he was sent to Church on behalf of the rest of the family who were all engaged in domestic and agricultural chores. Johnny's ability to remember and repeat the sermons on his return was an asset to them as they “would be well prepared for the jubilee indulgence” during the jubilee year.³⁰ It was also an opportunity to have a new sermon to regale his audiences when they gathered to hear him and see him perform.

Observation was another of Johnny's skills for understanding people and for developing practical techniques. The social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1925-) is helpful to understand the way children learn. As opposed to the behaviourist theory of B. F. Skinner that demonstrated

²⁹ *MO*, 17.

³⁰ *MO*, fn. 11, p. 25. “In the archdiocese of Turin, Archbishop Chiaveroti fixed the time for gaining the indulgence as March 12 to September 12, 1826. Don Bosco remembered the Buttigliera mission as having been organised to help the people of the area prepare for the jubilee year indulgence, which required repentance and confession, communion, and prayer.” *MO*, fn. 8, p. 24.

how learning is linked to a stimulus-response-reinforcement conditioning, Bandura developed a theory that emphasised the cognitive and symbolic representation of actions and their results. He made a compelling case for learning by observation and by modelling the behaviour of others. Following this, social skills improve, and growing children gradually learn to anticipate the consequences of their actions and monitor and regulate their own behaviour.³¹ Johnny had developed the skill of observation to the point of knowing his companions and 'regulating' his own behaviour in their company. He reminds his readers: "Take note. Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions' characters".³² Consequently, he was able to arbitrate judiciously whenever conflicts arose among them.

Perhaps the most interesting area in which Johnny put his observation skills to good use was that of acrobatics. Besides telling stories, he also entertained people by performing tricks which he learned by observing acrobats and magicians in marketplaces and at fairs. "I used to watch them closely to get the hang of the tricks, then go home and practise till I had mastered the skill".³³

Johnny's attention to the 'how' behind the 'what' – the method behind the content – was phenomenal. At an impressionable age when children are easily dazzled by the magic of performers, he was fascinated by the secrets that made their performances magical. Instead of being part of the audience, he would sneak his way to the sides in order to watch every move of the acrobat. This 'meta-thinking' demanded heightened concentration on learning the trick itself rather than letting himself be tricked by its seductive content.³⁴

The insistence of Marshal McLuhan (1911-1980) on drawing attention to the medium and its message or 'massage' rather than to the content in his celebrated phrase "The medium is the message"³⁵ was exactly that in which

³¹ Cf. the Bobo Doll experiment in Albert BANDURA et al., "Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models" in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 63 (1961) 575-582.

³² *MO*, 17.

³³ *MO*, 18.

³⁴ To appreciate this analytical 'way of seeing', it is worth looking at the challenges faced by media educators today in empowering young (and not so young) minds to be critical about the way mass media are used to captivate their audiences.

³⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1994, 7.

Johnny was engaged. Magic (in many ways similar to film and television) is essentially the art of distracting the audience. At the core of the performance lies the magician's capacity to critically observe the mood swings of his audience so as to grab their fleetingly unconscious moment in which to execute the trick. Distracting the audience's critical consciousness with 'content' was easy. It consisted of a flurry of useless gestures and abracadabra – all meant to let the secrets hidden behind the trick pass unnoticed. McLuhan describes the 'content' of a medium as a "juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind".³⁶ People normally focus on the obvious, the tantalizing piece of meat. Johnny wanted to be the mindful watchdog to learn *the trick behind the trick* for a worthy cause.

A humorous account of John's masterful sleight-of-hand based on his keen audience-observation is revealing. We present it here in its entirety, also to acquaint the reader with Don Bosco's lively narrative style.

Conjuring was a source of wonder. People sat wide-eyed at the sight of an endless stream of balls coming out of a little box too small to hold even one, or eggs tumbling out a little bag. But when they saw me producing balls from bystanders' noses, or heard me tell accurately how much money people had in their pockets, or when they watched me crush coins to dust between my fingers, my audiences got frightened and even lost their heads; they began to whisper that I was a sorcerer, that I had to be in league with the devil.³⁷

Soon he was summoned by the school superintendent, Canon Burzio, for an explanation. Admitting the boy into his study he began to question him with much politeness. He showed John that his popularity as a magician was suspect. People were beginning to believe that the devil himself was at work. He wanted to know everything about his magic with the assurance that the information would redound to his own well-being.

Keeping a straight face, I asked him for a few minutes to think over my reply. Then I asked him to tell me what time it was. He put his hand into his pocket, but his watch was not there.

"If you haven't got your watch," I suggested, "could you give me a five-soldi coin?"

³⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 18.

³⁷ *MO*, 63.

He checked all his pockets but could not find his purse.

"You rascal," he shouted angrily, "Either you are the devil's servant, or he's yours! You've already stolen my purse and my watch. I can't keep quiet any longer; I must denounce you. Even now I don't know what keeps me from giving you a good thrashing."

However, when he saw that I was smiling serenely, he got hold of himself and went on more calmly.

"Now let's take this quietly. Explain these mysteries to me." [...]

"Well, Father," I began respectfully, "I'll explain in a few words. It's all a matter of sleight of hand, information, and preparation."

"What information could you have about my watch and purse?"

"I'll explain it all quickly. Just after I came in, you gave some alms to a beggar.

You left your purse on a priedieu. Then you went into another room, leaving your watch on that side table. I hid them both; you thought you had them on your person, while they were really under this lampshade."

So saying, I lifted the lampshade and recovered both objects that the devil was supposed to have taken away.

The good canon had a hearty laugh. He asked me to give him a demonstration of sleight of hand, and how to make things appear and disappear. He enjoyed it all and gave me a little gift.

Finally, he told me, "Go and tell your friends that wonderment is the result of ignorance".³⁸

John's acute skills had transported magic to an 'art of the impossible' – or so it seems in the pages of Don Bosco's engaging autobiography. The effectiveness and appropriateness in the realisation of his aims was highly captivating. His audiences benefited from the sermons or the acrobatic tricks he performed, thanks to his ability to learn rapidly by practicing what he had attentively listened to and observed.

3. Cognitive skill acquisition and development

Another characteristic that strikes the reader of the *Memoirs* is the speed at which the young John Bosco is said to have acquired basic cognitive skills.

³⁸ *MO*, 64.

Until the 1960s, research into skill acquisition almost exclusively dealt with motor or kinetic performance. Paul M. Fitts (1912-1965) was the first to conduct an important discussion of skill acquisition as involving cognitive processes.³⁹ He suggested that motor skill acquisition follows three stages. The *cognitive* stage is the learning of rules and sets of rules to be employed in a performance. The *associative* stage lasts longer because previous strategies that are cognitively learned are now to be associated with specific situations in which those rules need to be applied in view of appropriate outcomes. In the *autonomous* stage, the components of performance are less dependent on cognitive control or external influences. At this third level, performances are skilled and spontaneous, and therefore less intentionally processed as in the two earlier stages.⁴⁰ A good example is the classical method of language acquisition where vocabulary and grammar are learned by cognition (first stage), then associated with practice for a long period of time (second stage), until the learner fluently and autonomously uses the language in daily interaction (third stage).

If our previous study of Johnny's process of learning can be termed 'rapid', one important reason could be that his cognitive skill was powerful enough to acquiesce and abstract the essence of the material to be learned and remembered. Without the velocity of his *cognitional* development, it would have been impossible for him to pass through the different *associative* situations that demanded application and recall in front of his audiences. Moreover, the anecdotes we have in the *Memoirs* reveal the frequency of *autonomous* performances – which implies that his level of skill acquisition was considerably high for his age. Two historical episodes may attest to the truth of this possibility. The first deals with his cognitional and associative capacity, the second with the autonomy of his performance.

In his first meeting with Fr. Cafasso cited above, John was on his way home after attending the mission⁴¹ at Buttigliera. A conversation between the priest and John ensued. On hearing Johnny admit that he *understood* the sermons he had just heard, the priest said:

³⁹ Craig SPEELMAN – Kim KIRSNER, *Beyond the Learning Curve: The construction of mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, 36.

⁴⁰ SPEELMAN – KIRSNER, *Beyond the Learning Curve*, 33-38.

⁴¹ A parish 'mission' is a period of prayer, conversion and reflection on Christian life. It is held on special occasions and is conducted by a preacher who delivers sermons at regular intervals. The mission referred to above occurred in 1826.

[FC] "If you can remember anything from this evening's sermons, I'll give you two pence."

[JB] "*Just tell me whether you wish to hear the first sermon, or the second.*"

[FC] "Just as you wish," he said, "as long as you tell me anything from it. Do you remember what the first sermon was about?"

[JB] "It was about the necessity of giving oneself to God in good time and not putting off one's conversion."

[FC] "And what was in the sermon?" the venerable old man asked, somewhat surprised.

[JB] "Oh, I remember quite well. If you wish *I will recite it all.*"

Without further ado, I launched into the preamble and went on to the three points. [...] There, amidst the crowd, he let me rattle on for half an hour.⁴²

If the historical accuracy of the narrative is to be believed, John's cognition and associative skills involving the processes of listening, understanding, summarizing, memorizing and then recalling in the span of half an hour was phenomenal for a child of fourteen.⁴³ Seen in the light of other similar instances during this period of John's life, it is difficult to disprove their veracity. Later we will learn how his memorization skills and his rapid acquisition of literacy improved his school progress report and earned him the respect and esteem of his companions. During this time, however, we surmise that his cognition and associative skills developed into a near-routine autonomous performance. How did this happen?

Johnny started school late and his learning schedule was rather disorganised. When he was nine years of age he picked up elementary literacy at Capriglio under Fr Joseph Lacqua (1824).⁴⁴ At thirteen (1828), he began elementary education at the Castelnovo school. He then resumed the study of Italian and Latin under Fr John Calosso's guidance at Murialdo (1829). At fifteen (1831), he attended public school in Chieri to study grammar, the humanities and rhetoric.⁴⁵ Here he was admitted to the sixth class where he

⁴² *MO*, 22. (italics mine).

⁴³ See the confusion about the dates and the possible explanation for his phenomenal remembrance of the sermons he heard in *MO*, fn. 11, p. 25.

⁴⁴ *MO*, 2. The critical notes state that he probably attended classes at Capriglio from autumn 1824 to spring 1826, when he was nine and ten years old. See *MO*, fn. 16, p. 5.

⁴⁵ BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, 127-128.

found himself among younger companions. Thanks to his cognitive ability to race ahead of his companions, he was promoted to the fifth class where he was happy to be among boys of his age. After two months he was upgraded yet again; this time to the fourth class, where he won the applause and admiration of his companions (largely due to a particular incident which we shall narrate in the next section). At the end of the school year (1830-1831) the high marks he obtained moved him a class higher to the third level. All in all, Johnny had completed the learning expected over a three-year period *in just one year!*⁴⁶ This rapid advancement in the esteem of his teachers and his consequent promotion reveal an exceptionally high cognitional skill acquisition and development – a fundamental precondition for effective and competent communication.

4. Reading and memorising skills

Continuing our study of Johnny's cognitional acquisition we have more evidence to prove and explain the reason for its rapidity through his good reading skills and his formidable memory.

Besides acrobatics, the skill frequently cited in this early phase of John Bosco's life is 'reading'.⁴⁷ It was his passion. We have seen that he learned basic literacy rather late, at the age of nine. But his mother's alertness to his budding talents more than made up for the delay. She encouraged him to read good books. In preparation for Holy Communion she restricted his manual work to give him more time to read and pray.⁴⁸ She also noticed that Johnny was a special kind of reader. He remembered and assimilated what he read with ease.⁴⁹ Barely a year after he learned to read, he was able to

⁴⁶ *MO*, 42. "One might ask how John was able to remember these sermons so well. He did have a great gift in his memory, as he has already recounted and as he will recount further." *MO*, fn. 11, p. 25.

⁴⁷ The words 'read', 'reader' and 'reading' appear 35 times from Chapters 1 to 16 comprising a total of approximately 26 pages (critical notes not included).

⁴⁸ *MO*, 21.

⁴⁹ Don Bosco "used to say that for him to read something was to remember it. When he was already well on in years, he could still entertain his secretaries by reciting long passages from Dante. A few months before his death, he was traveling in the coach with Father Rua. The conversation came around to some point of sacred history which had inspired Me-

share what he had read word-for-word with others. This included tales from the Carolingian epic romances.⁵⁰ This exceptional 'gift' was amply demonstrated during a lesson at the Chieri public school in 1830.

One day, the teacher asked him to read and explain the text by Cornelius Nepos. Johnny was suddenly aware that he had forgotten to bring his book along. He calmly took up his grammar book and pretended to read from it while reciting Cornelius from memory. The wide-eyed amazement on the faces of his companions drew the attention of the teacher, who initially thought John was up to mischief. On learning the astonishing truth, the teacher saved him the punishment, saying: "In tribute to your wonderful memory I'll overlook your forgetfulness. [Note Don Bosco's wordplay.] You're blessed. Only see that your gift is put to good use".⁵¹

Like his congenial features, Johnny's memory was a natural gift. He did not have to go through the laborious process of committing passages to memory like most of his companions. This was why he could dedicate greater time to recreational activities.

By paying attention at school I was able to learn as much as was necessary. In fact, in those days, I made no distinction between reading and studying, and I could easily recall material from books I had read or heard read. Moreover, my mother had trained me to get by on very little sleep, so I could read for two-thirds of the night at will, thus leaving the whole day free for activities of my own choice.⁵²

He enjoyed reading so much that when he finished the humanities course in 1834 – notwithstanding the good results and the fact that he passed his philosophy exam – he thought it better to continue his studies normally and take the rhetoric course which he completed a year later.⁵³ He even had an understanding with a Jewish bookseller who was happy to reduce

tastasio (1698-1782). Don Bosco recited whole stanzas from the Italian poet; it was very unlikely that he had read any of the poetry since leaving secondary school." *MO*, fn. 15, 43. See various examples of his extraordinary memory throughout the *Biographical Memoirs*, e.g. vol. I, pp. 294, 315, 321-323.

⁵⁰ *MO*, fn. 1, p. 18.

⁵¹ *MO*, 40.

⁵² *MO*, 69.

⁵³ *MO*, 52.

his book-borrowing fee to a minimum because of his frequent borrowing schedule – sometimes as frequently as *a book a day*.⁵⁴

The practice of reading that accompanied these early years, initially led him to choose the Franciscan Order so that “he dedicate himself to study and meditation”.⁵⁵ Later, in 1835, he changed his mind and joined the seminary. Here Johnny dedicated his time to reading good books and also included a special resolution in the rule of life he formulated at the time of his clerical investiture. He expressed his desire to forego reading secular literature and to devote himself solely to religious reading.⁵⁶ Don Bosco also confessed that the habit of late-night reading ruined his health.⁵⁷

5. Performance skills

No reader of the *Memoirs* can be indifferent to Johnny’s extraordinary capacity to metaphorically and literarily ‘stand out’ in a crowd. He displayed exceptional courage to face it, inform it, instruct it and entertain it at the age of ten.⁵⁸ Don Bosco undervalues this courage by stating quite plainly that

⁵⁴ *MO*, fn. 3, p. 69. Don Bosco read the Italian Classics from the *Biblioteca Popularis* series published between 1829 and 1840 by Joseph Pomba in Turin. “It was a one-hundred volume collection with each volume consisting of 160 pages of a small and compact, full of neat, fine, tightly packed print.” STELLA, *Life and Works*, 20, fn. 52.

⁵⁵ *MO*, 71. See the list of books he might have read at this time. The compilation is by STELLA, *Life and Works*, 28.

⁵⁶ *MO*, 80.

⁵⁷ *MO*, 69. The “anxiety and the subsequent spiritual and emotional intensity of life in the seminary probably had as much to do with the breakdown in John’s health as his all night reading.” Nevertheless he advised others not to exaggerate, because “the night is made for rest.” *MO*, 74, fn. 7. Joseph Pianta, owner of the bar in Chieri, where John Bosco worked confirmed the fact that “John would quite often spend entire nights with his books; in the morning I would still find him reading and writing by the light of his lamp.” (*BM* 1,217 also see *MO*, 55, fn. 1.)

⁵⁸ A century later John Reit, the founding director general of the British Broadcasting Corporation (from 1922 to 1938), would articulate the values of public service broadcasting in similar words: ‘to inform, educate and entertain’. They remain the mission statement of the BBC to this day. Cf. “Let that be a lesson to you all” in *BBC.com*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/526855.stm> (02-12-2014).

To enrich people’s lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain. Cf. http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/whoware/mission_and_values.

most of the members of his audience were illiterate and therefore he, with the little knowledge he obtained from listening to sermons and from reading, was merely the one-eyed king in the kingdom of the blind.⁵⁹ He reminisces: "In the wintertime [of 1826], everyone wanted me in the stable to tell stories. All sorts of people used to gather to spend five or even six hours⁶⁰ of their evenings listening, motionless, to selections from *The Kings of France*".⁶¹

With his first experience in leading a miniature festive oratory,⁶² he grew in the conviction that the use of entertaining methods was the *sine qua non* to attracting those who needed to catch up on the catechism or had not heard the Sunday sermons due to other engagements. We assume that the attraction did not consist in the mere telling of dramatic stories, but rather in the opportunity to see John the actor dramatically telling them. He must have imitated the theatrical skills of folk performers in their use of facial expressions, gestures, vocal sound effects to accompany the narration with variations in tone and volume of voice. How else would he keep them 'listening, motionless for hours on winter evenings'?

We need to note that when narrating stories, he would "always begin and end [...] with a sign of the cross and a Hail Mary".⁶³ This was a simple routine. Later, as he learned more attractive ways of keeping people entertained through jugglery, sleight-of-hand and acrobatics, he began to introduce in the routine four new elements: the setting or the *mise-en-scène*, the dramatic suspense, the organization of performance-time, and the norms for audience attendance – all important components of professional performance that would be theoretically elaborated years later by Kenneth Burke (1897-1993).⁶⁴ Take this narrative for instance:

⁵⁹ *MO*, 17.

⁶⁰ The figure of speech Don Bosco had a tendency to use when describing numbers or time limits was hyperbole. See Stella, *Life and Works*, 32. If one calculates the 'five or even six hours' spent by his audience in sitting through his 'evening' sessions in 'winter', one would have to include a part of the afternoon or perhaps a part of the night.

⁶¹ *MO*, 17.

⁶² 'Oratory' is the name Don Bosco gave to his work of gathering boys in a place for the ultimate purpose of prayer on Sundays and feast days. It was a space he also made attractive by including games, outings, schooling and employment. The idea of the oratory tradition for young people began with St Phillip Neri (1515-1595).

⁶³ *MO*, 17.

⁶⁴ The elements mentioned are taken from the larger model called the *dramatistic pen-*

At Becchi there was a field in which grew several trees [*the setting*]. One of them, a pear tree that is still there, was very helpful to me then. I used to sling a rope from it to another tree some distance away. I had a table with a haversack on it, and on the ground a mat for the jumps.

When I had everything set up and everyone was eager to marvel at my latest feats [*suspense*], I would invite them [*performance-time*] to recite the rosary and sing a hymn. Then standing on the chair, I preached to them or, better, repeated as much as I could remember from the explanation of the gospel I had heard in church that morning; or sometimes I recalled episodes from something I had heard or read. After the sermon there was a short prayer, and then the show began. At that point you would have seen, just as I am telling you, [*roles*] the preacher transformed into a professional acrobat. [...] This went on for several hours. At the end of it I was tired. A short prayer brought proceedings to a close, and everyone went about his business. [*norms*] Those who cursed or engaged in bad talk or refused to join in the prayers were not allowed to watch the show.⁶⁵

The time-organization through the performance was a routine well-known to his audience. But the most attractive part was indubitably the more challenging as well: being the protagonist, the front-man of his own performance. Mastering acrobatic skills required determination, hard work, great risk and perseverance. Don Bosco adds: “You can imagine all the falls and tumbles and bumps and crashes I was always having!”⁶⁶ Here is Don Bosco’s candid display of his entertaining repertoire.

I could juggle, do midair somersaults and the swallow trick, and walk on my hands. [...] [I] got myself out of a tied sack, swallowed coins and then produced them from someone’s nose. I multiplied balls and eggs, changed water into wine, killed and chopped up a chicken and then brought it back to life again so that it crowed better than before. These were part of my stock in trade. I walked the tightrope like an ordinary path, jumped and danced on it and hung by one foot or one hand, sometimes by two.⁶⁷

tad by Kenneth Burke. Cf. Kathleen M. GERMAN, “Dramatism and Dramatistic Pentad”, in Stephen W. LITTLEJOHN – Karen A. FOSS, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Sage, California 2009, 321.

⁶⁵ *MO*, 17-18 Italicised words in brackets are some aspects of the *dramatistic pentad* of Kenneth Burke.

⁶⁶ *MO*, 17.

⁶⁷ *MO*, 17-18.

The solo performance at the 'front' in full view of his adoring audience also had a laborious *back-stage* not many were aware of. Here again, Johnny was the backstage attendant of his own performance.

Going to fairs and markets, watching magicians, getting props for my shows—all these took money; where did I get it? I had several ways. Any money that my mother or others gave me to buy some tidbit, little tips, gifts, all this I saved for this purpose. I was also quite clever at catching birds in cages, snares, and nets and with birdlime; I was very good at finding birds' nests. Whenever I had gathered enough of these, I knew where I could get a good price for them. Mushrooms, plants used for dyes, heather were all another source of money for me.

There is no doubt that John enjoyed being the showman of the crowds and worked very hard to keep the performance attractive. However through the process of maturation he began to ask himself questions about its true worth. After he donned the clerical habit on his way to the priesthood, he reflected: "The style of life I had lived up to then had to be radically reformed. My life in the past had not been wicked, but I had been proud and dissipated, given over to amusements, games, acrobatics, and other such things. These pursuits gave passing joy, but did not satisfy the heart."⁶⁸ In 1835, on joining the seminary, John decided to give up acrobatics altogether.⁶⁹

6. Leadership skills

Good leaders are known for their charismatic communication skills and, according to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), good leaders are born, not made.⁷⁰ From all that we have seen above, the life of young John Bosco confirms this theory. Don Bosco's autobiographical account of his early years presents a robust, energetic youth, born with the ability to lead.

Carlyle's theory, however, is not without its critics. They claim that there

⁶⁸ *MO*, 79.

⁶⁹ Cf. *MO*, 72.

⁷⁰ Thomas CARLYLE, "The History of the World, I said already, was the Biography of Great Men." In *Collected Works*. Chapman and Hall, London: (year?) p. 17. Retrieved 2014-09-12.

are other factors that determine the making of a leader, such as education, context, and culture. Yet, no research has completely rejected Carlyle's claim.⁷¹ A contemporary model of his theory that combines personal traits with other attributes in an integrated conceptually meaningful way is the one proposed by Stephen J. Zaccaro. According to him, some of the personality traits of leaders are: Cognitive ability, Extroversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability, Openness, Agreeableness, Need for power, Need for achievement, Motivation to lead (Dominance), Social intelligence.⁷²

To apply all these aspects to our study of the young John Bosco may seem exaggerated. On the other hand, the five preceding communication skills have elements that can be re-read in the light of the leadership traits provided by Zaccaro.⁷³ Here, we will provide anecdotal evidence to touch upon only four of Johnny's traits which have not yet been elaborated in this paper. These are: Emotional stability, Need for power, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. We shall deal with them in pairs.

Emotional stability and Need for power: Don Bosco's description of himself in his *Memoirs* provides us with a picture of an extremely proactive youth, full of initiative, ready to make the first move when morality and human dignity are violated. His dream at the age of nine already gives us a clue to his leadership style. On seeing a crowd of boys swearing in the midst of their games and laughter, Johnny jumps into their midst to reprove them with harsh words and blows.⁷⁴ His exuberance to correct the wrong being done and his desire to control a situation gone awry also reveals his impetuosity and irascibility. The flare-up with his step-brother is another example. Anthony's anger at seeing John study while he slogged away in the fields reached its zenith. "I've had my fill of this grammar business. Look at

⁷¹ Critics of the theory believe that other attributes or factors – such as social context, constraints of a situation, the ability to lead in different ways across disparate organizational domains, variances in duration of effects, differences in distal and proximate influences in processes and performance – also influence the making of leaders.

⁷² Cf article by S. J. ZACCARO, C. KEMP & P. BADER, "Leader Traits and Attributes" in J. ANTONAKIS, A. T. CIANCIOLO & R. J. STERNBERG (Eds.), *The Nature of Leadership*, Sage, California 2004.

⁷³ Don Bosco's personality traits that are similar to Zaccaro's categories and are already dealt with above are Cognitive ability, Extroversion, Social intelligence, Openness, Need for achievement and Social intelligence.

⁷⁴ *MO*, 9.

me”, he said, “I’ve grown big and strong without even setting eyes on such books”. In a fit of anger Johnny retorted: “That’s nonsense! Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you are, and he never went to school either.” Hearing this, Anthony lurched forward in fury, but John’s speed and instinct saved him from a volley of blows.⁷⁵

Could his ability to take the initiative in rectifying wrong-doing, combined with his emotional outbursts when faced with disagreements be interpreted as a need for control, or in Zaccoro’s terms, a ‘need for power’? Indeed, Johnny showed remarkable promptness when responding to situations that went out of hand. He manifested eagerness to ‘take control’ of unwieldy circumstances. He could stand up to tougher companions at Chieri if he wished to. He was even proud to declare: “All of them – including those older and bigger than I – respected my mettle and my strength”.⁷⁶ For instance, when bullies surrounded Louis Comollo, a ‘shy and retiring’ companion, Johnny decisively intervened to stop them. But when they persisted and ganged up to attack him instead, he gave them a taste of his anger.

I forgot myself completely. Brute strength moved me, not reason. With no chair or stick within reach, I grabbed one of my fellow students by the shoulders and swung him round like a club to beat the others. I knocked down four of them; the rest took to their heels yelling for mercy.⁷⁷

Comollo’s gentle words to him after the incident went straight to his heart: “John my friend, I’m amazed how strong you are. But, believe me; God didn’t give you strength to massacre your companions. His will is that we should love one another, forgive one another, and return good for evil”. That day Johnny learned the meaning of true power: not merely to fight injustice, but to love the unjust offender. “I could only wonder at my companion’s charity. I put myself entirely into his hands and let him guide me where and how he wished”.⁷⁸

In order to lead well, John had to learn to control his emotions. He may have been born with significant leadership qualities but his ‘need for power’ even for a just cause required tempering. His dream at the age of nine held

⁷⁵ *MO*, 27.

⁷⁶ *MO*, 50.

⁷⁷ *MO*, 50.

⁷⁸ *MO*, 50.

the secret: the Lady of his dream “under whose guidance he would become wise”⁷⁹ would show him the way.

Conscientiousness and Agreeableness: We have already seen that Johnny learned to lead from his very first association with friends at Becchi. By the time he was ten, he was held in such esteem that he formed a kind of festive oratory. His ability to ‘read their minds’ made him their undisputed leader who “tried always to help and never to hurt”, who was “strong and brave enough to stand up even to older companions”, who “acted as arbiter” when quarrels broke out, and whose decisions were accepted graciously.⁸⁰ When he grew older and had to leave for Chieri, he began to socialise on the basis of a golden rule he had set for himself: avoid bad people, be courteous to the indifferent and befriend those who are good.⁸¹

Johnny’s first test in leading through interpersonal peer education began when his host and relative, Lucy Matta⁸² requested that he take charge of her only son who was “more interested in games than in school work” and that he check his daily homework. John agreed willingly even though the boy was older and a class above him at school.

I took him in hand as if he were my brother. I used little prizes as bribes to get to him. I played indoor games with him and helped him to be faithful to his religious duties. Little by little he became more tractable, obedient, and studious. After six months he had become so good and diligent that his teacher was satisfied and he won honors in class. His mother was so delighted that she refused to accept my monthly rent.⁸³

Companions who were “careless about everything” and failed to lure Johnny “into their escapades” also approached him for help. He lent or dictated his homework to them – actions that were frowned upon by the

⁷⁹ *MO*, 9. This is a reference to his dream at the age of nine in which he sees Mary, presented to him as his teacher by her son, Jesus.

⁸⁰ *MO*, 17.

⁸¹ *MO*, 43.

⁸² Lucy Matta (1783-1851) was originally from Morialdo. She was distantly related to Don Bosco’s mother, Margaret. Lucy’s husband Joseph Pianta (who died in 1824) was also a distant kinsman of Margaret. In 1833 Lucy played host to John Bosco as he attended the Chieri school. Cf. *MO*, fn. 1, p. 55.

⁸³ *MO*, 43.

teacher who considered them false charity that only encouraged laziness. When forbidden to continue in this manner, John found another method of helping them: he explained problems and lent a helping hand to those who needed it. "Thus I made everyone happy and won the goodwill and affection of my companions. *At first they came to play, then to listen to the stories or to do their homework, and finally for no reason at all*, just as the boys at Murialdo and Castelnuovo used to do".⁸⁴ He called the gathering, the 'Cheerful Society'.⁸⁵ The members would meet weekly for discussions and to enjoy each other's company.

Anyone was welcome to come to these gatherings. [...] We entertained ourselves with some pleasant recreation, with discussions on religious topics, spiritual reading, and prayer. We exchanged good advice, and if there were any personal corrections we felt we should hand out to each other, whether these were our own personal observations or criticisms we had heard others make, we did that.⁸⁶

There was a reason for the name, because everyone was obliged to look for such books, discuss such subjects, or play such games as would contribute to the happiness of the members. Whatever would induce sadness was forbidden, especially things contrary to God's law. Those who swore, used God's name in vain, or indulged in bad talk were turned away from the club at once. So it was that *I found myself the leader of a crowd of companions*.⁸⁷

The rules adopted were to "avoid language and actions unbecoming a good Christian" and "exactness in the performance of scholastic and religious duties". The result was that Johnny's popularity soared. "All this helped my reputation, and in 1832 my companions respected me like the captain of a small army. I was much in demand for entertainments, for helping pupils privately, or for giving lessons or reviews at home".⁸⁸ John's youthful leadership may be best exemplified in his happiness to lead for good and with good cheer; to serve all, especially those who were weaker.

⁸⁴ *MO*, 43. (italics mine).

⁸⁵ The English version which is being used in this article translates "La società dell'allegria" as "Society for a Good Time". I prefer "The Cheerful Society". In 1830-1832 he started a branch of the 'Cheerful society' at Murialdo too. *MO*, 46.

⁸⁶ *MO*, 46.

⁸⁷ *MO*, 43-44.

⁸⁸ *MO*, 43-44.

B) Personality traits in the making

The competency in the plethora of communication skills mentioned above would not have been sufficiently effective had they not emanated from the heart of a single evolving personality. Under the theory of personality traits, “communication is treated as a secondary process that translates inner personality characteristics into outwardly expressed forms of communication. Communication is treated as an overt expression of who we truly are in terms of our traits”.⁸⁹ This implies that our study of Johnny’s many communication skills were but expressions of his personality.

What were the inner characteristics of young Bosco’s developing personality from which his overt communication skills emanated so efficaciously? Once again, basing ourselves on the *Memoirs*, we abstract from Don Bosco’s anecdotally rich autobiography signs of the evolution of three important personality traits: self-esteem, zeal and integrity. This triad supported, permeated and animated the rich expressivity that was gradually unfolding in Johnny’s life between the ages of ten and twenty.

1. Self-esteem

Any reader of the *Memoirs* is bound to be astonished at the confidence Johnny exuded during his many performances in front of peers and adults. His ability to believe in himself reached its peak when he took on a much-talked-about acrobat who boasted of exceptional prowess. The event happened in the town of Chieri when John was sixteen years old. His friends raised a collection to pay 20 francs to support his participation. The news, “Schoolboy challenges professional runner!” became the talk of the town and attracted a huge crowd. The show began with various competitive tests that included a race, a long jump, tricks with the magic wand and a climb to the topmost branch of an elm tree. To the surprise of the audience, the schoolboy defeated the professional in all four items. Out of compassion, however, Johnny returned all the money he had won on condition that the acrobat treat his companions to dinner. In conclusion, Don Bosco writes,

⁸⁹ J. Kevin BARGE, “Leadership theories”, in Stephen W. LITTLEJOHN – Karen A. FOSS, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Sage, California 2009, 594.

“Who could ever describe the applause of the crowd, the joy of my companions, the anger of the acrobat, and *my own pride* at having defeated not just some fellow student but this swaggering braggart?”⁹⁰

A challenge like this obviously involved much more than skilfulness. It meant performing under pressure in full view of Chieri's townsfolk. To be able to perform in public with interior confidence could only emerge from a culture and a spirituality: a culture of positive growth and encouragement, and a spirituality of interior fortitude. Where did John get these? The presence of Anthony and his negative attitude to John's desire to study was anything but positive. We can infer that Johnny's much needed stimulus came solely from his mother. This is confirmed by Don Bosco himself.

Now you might ask me, Did my mother mind my wasting my time playing magician? I assure you that my mother loved me dearly, and I had boundless trust in her. I would not take one step without her approval. *She knew everything, saw everything, and let me do it.* Indeed, if I needed something, she willingly came to my help.⁹¹

In the light of this reality, John's deep loyalty and fondness for his mother takes on new meaning. While she looked after his basic needs, as most mothers normally would, Margaret was also attentive to Johnny's innate abilities, and made attempts to support their development. His dream at the age of nine must have been a confirmation to her, and a positive affirmation of her preoccupation for his future.⁹² It emboldened her to seek help from those who could arrange for him to leave for Chieri where he would be assured higher education and the chance to let his many talents unfurl. Don Bosco called her his “first and best earthly teacher”.⁹³

⁹⁰ *MO*, 67.

⁹¹ *MO*, 18. John also explains how his mother supplied him pocket money which he saved for his performances.

⁹² The *MO*, does not elaborate on her ‘coming to the help’ of her son, but supplementary literature from the *Biographical Memoirs* by G. B. Lemoyne reveals the deep pain she felt at not being able to send him to public school at Chieri because of acute poverty. She was unable to pay his school fees, nor the boarding and lodging fees while he attended school. Thanks to the generous help of the parish priest and others, Mama Margaret was inadvertently consolidating her son's identity and self-esteem on the foundations she had already laid at Becchi. *MO*.

⁹³ *MO*, xxi.

The psychological key to understanding this filial admission of indebtedness to one's mother may be found in the study of Erik Erikson (1902-1994) on the stages of childhood. He acknowledges the pivotal role a mother plays in her child's upbringing. However, during the latency period of development (between 6 to 12 years), Erikson claims that parents are no longer the complete authorities although they are still important.⁹⁴ John's case seems to introduce a variant. His delayed schooling implied that he was with his mother all through latency.

Furthermore, Erikson states that the period of latency has immense personal and social benefits for the growth of a child.⁹⁵ Under Margaret's guiding presence, John matured from childhood to adolescence. He experienced the thrill of learning, creating and accomplishing numerous new skills, growing in knowledge, and developing a sense of industry. He also entered the phase of social development by nurturing positive feelings of identity among peers in the neighbourhood. Margaret's contribution to the growth of Johnny's healthy self-esteem is therefore a psycho-social fact. When he shifted to Chieri at the age of fifteen, he admitted "I had to use my own initiative to learn how to deal with my companions". And when he found it hard to stop them from insisting that he rob his own landlady, Lucy Matta, he said: "I used to tell them that my mother had asked my landlady to look after me, and out of love for my mother I did not want to go anywhere nor do anything without good Lucy's consent".⁹⁶

Backed by Erikson's theory, we can safely assume that in Johnny's case, the positive self-esteem of the child was an indicator of positive parenting, because "competent parenting requires that the mother has achieved a mature sense of psychosocial identity".⁹⁷ Margaret's gift of healthy self-esteem to her son is by that fact a commendable compliment to her motherhood.

⁹⁴ Cf. "Erikson's Stages of Development", in *Learning-Theories.com*, <http://www.learning-theories.com/eriksons-stages-of-development.html> (13-12-2014).

⁹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *MO*, 43.

⁹⁷ Nancy HURLBUT, et al., "Adolescent Mothers' Self-Esteem and Role Identity and Their Relationship to Parenting Skills Knowledge", in *Adolescence*, Vol. 32, No. 127, Fall 1997, 639-653.

2. Zeal

When John shared his dream at the breakfast table the morning after, various interpretations by members of the family poured in. It was only his mother, Margaret, whose profound faith opened her mind to the possibility that God was calling her son to the priesthood. If this was Johnny's vocation, then she as a mother had the duty to protect, nurture and see it bloom. Under her guidance the dream became a sign, the sign became a prophecy, and the prophecy a daily commitment. Pietro Stella explains: "Little John was deeply affected by it [the dream]. To him it seemed to be some sort of divine communication. It had all the outer dressing (the signs and guarantees) of the supernatural. It was as if some new divine character had been indelibly stamped on his life".⁹⁸

The feeling of being commissioned injected new meaning into his acrobatic shows such that he was not afraid or ashamed to let people know his secret yearning. His reply to Father Calosso who asked him why he wanted to study was clear and deliberate: "I'd like to become a priest" because "I'd like to attract my companions, talk to them, and teach them our religion. They're not bad, but they become bad because they have no one to guide them".⁹⁹ This was definitely another John, not the moral vigilante in the dream whose immediate response to the foul language of his peers was to punch them. This new John was already appropriating the message he had heard in his first dream "not by blows but by gentleness and love [...] make yourself humble, strong and energetic".¹⁰⁰ Johnny now felt interiorly *driven* to push himself beyond limits through a creative combination of catechism lessons and acrobatic tricks, through reading good books and through a burning desire to study for the priesthood. While tending cattle, working in the farm, or walking to and from school, he was glued to his books.¹⁰¹ And

⁹⁸ Pietro STELLA, *Life and Works*, Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle 1985, 9. On the impact of the dream on John's life Stella goes on to say: "Looking ahead, we can say that this particular dream affected Don Bosco's whole way of thinking and acting. It especially affected his way of sensing the presence of God in the life of an individual and in the history of the world." STELLA, *Life and Works*, 10.

⁹⁹ *MO*, 22.

¹⁰⁰ *MO*, 9.

¹⁰¹ "Take note. The walk to and from school afforded me some time to study. When I got home, I would take the hoe in one hand and my grammar the other, and along the way

Margaret, seeing his exceptional intellectual qualities, allowed him to read good books even “for two-thirds of the night”.¹⁰²

His observation of priests who were distant from the young provoked him into becoming the priest he wanted them to be – a new kind of *priest for youngsters*.

If I were a priest, I would act differently. I would look for boys and get them around me. I would want them to know that I care for them and desire their friendship. I would speak kindly to them, give them good advice, and dedicate myself entirely to their spiritual welfare. How I would love to have a chance to talk with my pastor just as I did with Father Calosso. Why shouldn't it be so?¹⁰³

His resolve strengthened him also in the face of tempting financial offers that promised stability and security. When John Roberto invited him to stay on and run the tailoring business at Castelnuovo, Johnny graciously declined. “I had other ambitions, [...] I wanted to pursue my studies. While I tried my hand to keep myself busy, I never lost sight of my main objective”.¹⁰⁴ At Chieri too he refrained from accepting an offer that no youth in dire straits could have possibly refused.

When I finished my homework, I had a lot of spare time; I used to devote part of it to reading the Latin and Italian classics and the rest to making liquors and jams. Halfway through that year I was in a position to prepare coffee and chocolate; I knew the recipes for many kinds of sweets, drinks, ices, and various refreshments. My landlord began by giving me free lodging. Then, gauging the boost I could give to his business, he made me an attractive offer; he tried to induce me to give up my other concerns and work full time for him. But I was doing that work only for fun and relaxation; *I had no intention of giving up my studies*.¹⁰⁵

I would study ‘When qui, quae quod you'd render’ until I reached the place of work. Then glancing longingly at the grammar, I would put it in a corner and begin hoeing, weeding, or gathering greens according to the need. [...] When there was a rest break. I went off on my own to study, a book in one hand, a hunk of bread in the other. I did the same thing on my way home. Written work had to be done in short periods snatched at mealtimes or in time borrowed from sleep.” *MO*, 27.

¹⁰² *MO*, 69.

¹⁰³ STELLA, *Life and Works*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ *MO*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ *MO*, 54.

How does one explain Johnny's highly focused personality, his will-power and perseverance at such an early age? The theory of 'functional autonomy' of Gordon Allport (1897-1967) may help clarify our understanding. He makes a distinction between a 'motive' and a 'drive'. Motives are expressed reasons or sensations that trigger one to choose a particular way of acting or behaving. Motives give rise to drives that are deeper, that persist and outgrow their original motives. John's many motives from the early stages of his rational life may have evolved or coalesced as he grew older. Loosely speaking, these motives could have been the desire for affirmation by his mother; appreciation by his friends; showmanship in his acrobatic performances; popularity in competing with professionals – yet, the drive to pursue his ideal persisted long after all these motives were realised. Johnny also recognised that these motivations “did not really satisfy the heart”.¹⁰⁶ This is probably why he felt he had to “change radically”.¹⁰⁷ At the base of his many motives, the drive was still constant and alive.

Stella says: “Not only did John's ideal remain ever present in his mind, it sometimes became a cause of great anxiety and torment. The idea of progressing with his studies was constantly on his mind, since that was the road that would lead him to the priesthood”.¹⁰⁸ His desire to respond to God's original plan permeated all his choices. No other event in his early life could bring this truth home than the sudden death of his first and best benefactor, Fr Calosso. His hopes were dashed, and he was inconsolable, until he dreamed again. This time he was “sorely reproached”¹⁰⁹ for having put his hope in human beings and not in the goodness of God. Stella confirms: “God now took over first place in John's awareness and his future projects”.¹¹⁰

3. Integrity

True maturity is what happens when the exterior props are removed and growth is sustained and promoted from within. These interior states deter-

¹⁰⁶ STELLA, *Life and Works*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ STELLA, *Life and Works*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ STELLA, *Life and Works*, 20.

¹⁰⁹ *MO*, 31.

¹¹⁰ STELLA, *Life and Works*, 20.

mine the quality and value of human life as a whole. Thus the challenge to be *authentic* to one's ideals is higher than the striving to be sociologically or communicatively competent.

Don Bosco's stories of his childhood evince marvellous feats of intelligence, memory and acrobatic skills performed gladly in the presence of others. But the proof of his all-round maturation lay in the manner in which he confronted the *interior tests of conscience* on the way to becoming an autonomous adult.

Bustling Chieri offered many distractions for him and his companions to succumb with ease. And Johnny was often put to the test.

Some wanted to get me to a show, others into some gambling, and still others to go swimming.¹¹¹ And there were suggestions that I should steal fruit from the town gardens or country orchards. One companion was so bold as to suggest that I should steal a valuable object from my landlady so that we could buy some sweets. Gradually I got to know the undesirables and firmly avoided their company.¹¹²

Thanks to his zeal, he did not surrender to the lure of these digressions. However simple this may seem, it meant being humble and submissive to God's plan. Don Bosco recalls: "It was not easy for me to be submissive because I liked to do things my way and follow my own childish whims [...]".¹¹³ Thanks to his mother,¹¹⁴ he learned that the key to Divine submission was self-control and the practice of the examination of conscience (in view of receiving the sacrament of confession). It kept him vigilant and attentive to the dictates of his inner voice in a healthy, non-scrupulous way.¹¹⁵

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), the creator of logotherapy, calls conscience

¹¹¹ In Piedmont, swimming was considered a moral problem because it was dangerous, immodest and sometimes led to improper behaviour. *MO*, fn. 2, p. 44.

¹¹² *MO*, 43.

¹¹³ *MO*, 21.

¹¹⁴ Don Bosco sets his mother up as an example in the attentiveness to matters of conscience: "I remember well how she herself prepared me for my first confession. She took me to church, *made her own confession first*, then presented me to the confessor. Afterwards, she helped me to make my thanksgiving. She continued to do this until I reached the age when she judged me able to use the sacrament well on my own." *MO*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Later he would consider his greatest weakness to be pride, because it had put down deep roots in his heart. *MO*, 71.

the “spiritual unconscious”.¹¹⁶ It is not just one factor among many but the core of our being and the source of personal integrity. It cannot be reduced to universal laws because it is intuitive and highly personalised. “Being human is being responsible – existentially responsible, responsible for one’s own existence”.¹¹⁷ He calls conscience “the wisdom of the heart” that is “more sensitive than reason can ever be sensible.”¹¹⁸ It has a reality of its own, independent of our minds. It is not something created by our imagination. Conscience tells us what will give our life meaning and we will find meaning only when we live by our conscience: “meaning must be found and cannot be given, [...] meaning is something to discover rather than to invent”.¹¹⁹ It has to be perceived and lived.¹²⁰

Don Bosco’s *Memoirs* demonstrates his quest for integrity by being attentive to the inner voice from a very early age. The death of Fr Calosso when John was fourteen, presents us with a typical example. Much before his death the priest had assured him: “Don’t worry about the future. As long as I’m alive I’ll see that you want for nothing. And I’ll make provision for you after my death”¹²¹ But when death came, it came without warning. Fr. Calosso suffered a stroke that left him speechless and immobile for two days. Before dying, he gave John the key to his money and made signs that he was not to give it to anyone. That key contained the provision he had made for John’s future studies towards the priesthood. It was the reason he had taken Johnny under his wing, and it was John’s sliver of hope. Yet, when the heirs turned up, John “handed over to them the key and everything else”.¹²² Historians see this straightforward declaration of John Bosco’s sense of detachment as an “impressive understatement”.¹²³ Teresio Bosco’s investigations reveal that Fr Calosso had left Johnny a veritable fortune of 6000 lire (valued in 1985 as 2,400,000 lire or US \$ 16,000) – an amount that

¹¹⁶ VIKTOR FRANKL, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1975, 26. This book first published in 1948, is an examination of the relation of psychology and religion.

¹¹⁷ FRANKL, *The Unconscious God*, 26.

¹¹⁸ FRANKL, *The Unconscious God*, 39.

¹¹⁹ FRANKL, *The Unconscious God*, 112-113.

¹²⁰ Cf. FRANKL, *The Unconscious God*, 115.

¹²¹ *MO*, 27.

¹²² *MO*, 28.

¹²³ *MO*, fn. 7, p. 29.

would have made him reach his goal while also putting his poverty-stricken family on the road to prosperity.¹²⁴

Besides these quests for living authentically on a human plane, John's continual striving 'to be the best he could be' was also guided by supernatural signs. Four dreams emphasised the importance of trusting God's plans for him. The dream at the age of nine (1824) made him see himself as part of a special mission to save abandoned youngsters. The dream after Calosso's death (1830) 'sorely reproached' him for putting his hope in men and not in God's providence. The third dream (1834) put to rest his doubts about joining the Franciscans when he saw that the peace the monastery offered was fictitious. A fourth dream he had in Murialdo was repeated time and again. It confirmed his mission to be a guide to an immense number of poor and abandoned youth.

These four dreams in the span of ten years helped him see that the fullness of authentic living was to recognise his life as being called and accompanied for a special mission, and to consign his will, his intelligence and his skills for the realization of that higher plan. The act of writing his *Memoirs* was itself an act of testifying to the truth that "God himself has always been our guide".¹²⁵

Conclusion

We began our study on the premise that an analysis of Don Bosco's effectiveness as an educator cannot ignore the indispensable role played by his competency as a communicator. To pursue this hypothesis, we prepared the ground for a study of the first part of his *Memoirs* that deals with the years during which his communication skills were nurtured. After establishing the scientific legitimacy of using his autobiography as our primary text, we proceeded to explain the theory-guided method we would choose to evaluate competency. We identified six communication skills to be analysed under the narrow lens of insights from classical theories of the social sciences.

Our reading of the *Memoirs* also brought to light the fact that communication competency is more than a mere study of skills, it is largely dependent on the personality traits that characterise the people who use

¹²⁴ *MO*, fn. 7, 29.

¹²⁵ "Preface", *MO*, xliii.

them. We therefore evidenced three essential personality traits of the young John Bosco that seemed to indicate the tone, the drive and the depth of his communication. These personality traits, we found, were self-esteem, zeal and integrity respectively.

Our study also demonstrated that Johnny Bosco was in the process of developing a personality that made his capacity to communicate stand out not only for his competencies but also for his competence. We therefore have valid reason to prove that John's maturing faith and confidence in the search for a purposeful and examined life provided greater depth to his prolific communication throughout the remaining fifty years of his adult life – whether as friend of youth, priest, educator, founder of a religious order or saint.

To give further credence to this claim, however, one would need to engage in an extensive analysis of Don Bosco's communication competence *as an adult* – a topic for another time, and perhaps, for another researcher, one better equipped to interpret the immense historical data already available.