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ABACUS

The abacus is a traditional counting device or ‘counting tray’ with a frame and board, and beads or counters to calculate numbers. It was in common use in ancient societies to add and subtract large numbers, and might be said to be a mechanical calculator that is an early predecessor of electronic calculators. There were different styles of construction in operation in China, Japan, Greece and Rome, although it was perhaps originally invented in ancient China. The Chinese abacus has thirteen vertical wires, with seven beads on each wire. The abacus has been widely used in schools to help to teach numbers and arithmetic.

See also: arithmetic

GARY McCULLOCH

ABELARD, PETER (1079–1142)

Abelard, whose name derives from Latin terms for ‘bee’ and ‘tutor’, renounced inheritance in order to devote his life to study. He was famed for developing a dialectical method of discourse and credited with founding the University of Paris. He initially taught within the Cathedral School under William of Champeaux, but soon broke away to set up his own schools at Melun and later at Corbeil. He eventually became Chair of the Cathedral school in 1113. His stance that, through doubt, one can arrive at true knowledge, inevitably led him into dispute with ecclesiastic authorities.

A follower of Plato and Aristotle, Abelard promoted the idea of intellectual reflection as being a route to knowledge of universal and religious truth. He influenced Thomas Aquinas and for some came to be seen as a harbinger of Protestantism.

A prolific author, books such as *Yes and No* challenged the view that Church authorities were to be followed, leading to most of his works being included in the infamous Index of Forbidden Books. He was denounced for his thoughts on the Holy Trinity in 1121 and condemned for heresy in 1140. His belief in openness of discussion was reflected in his reputation as a brilliant and charismatic teacher. From 1136 to 1138, whilst lecturing in Paris, one of his pupils was John of Salisbury. Another source for his universal fame derives from the correspondence between himself and his lover, Heloise, who bore his child. This became a popular classic translated into every European vernacular.

See also: Aristotle; church; John of Salisbury; Plato; scholasticism

STEVEN COWAN

ABILITY

A wide variety of human abilities has been recognised throughout recorded history, including physical, mental, creative and interpersonal abilities. Particular abilities are valued in different cultures and may be reflected in educational aims and curriculum content. Within education, the notion of