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First Year English in the High School.

The question of curriculum of study for the public schools seems doomed always to have "the wolf on this side, the dog on that." The people are pulling one way, demanding that their children shall have a mixture of the useful and the ornamental, and caring little for rules of logical order or theories of philosophic method; while the higher institutions are pulling in the opposite direction, insisting that the aim of the lower schools shall be to meet the conditions of admission within their doors. The matter-of-fact business man calls the public schools to an account, if his son lacks his own facility and accuracy in measuring wood or in writing and computing the interest on a promissory note; the mother surrounded by the refining influences of wealth does not understand why her daughter is not allowed to pursue the study of French in the grammar school; the clergyman preaches against the superficiality of public school training, if a girl in his Sunday School happens not to know where Antioch is; and the college professor cares only that the freshman's knowledge meet the exactions of his particular examinations. The business man gives but little credit to the schools for the general discipline they afford, which makes it possible for the young graduate, by a little special attention, to do anything of a business nature he is likely to be called upon to do; the clergyman, from the character of his study so familiar with biblical geography, fails to consider the necessary scope of a modern child's knowledge of places, and overlooks the fact that the girl referred to would pass a better general examination in the subject of geography than he himself could pass; and the professor seems not to be aware that there are other educational interests as important as those in which he is specially concerned. The golden rule for the teacher is: Consider the rights of others; your department of instruction is not the only one.

There is a tendency in meetings like this to discuss principles and abstractions rather than what relates to practice. In this paper an attempt is made to treat in a plain manner and briefly a simple matter of practical bearing, which is just now receiving considerable attention from both teachers and the public.

The question of giving the study of English greater prominence

in our secondary courses of study has already passed through the necessary stage of agitation, and it is now in order to examine a no less important phase—how this is to be done.

In the ardor which accompanies new movements there is danger of claiming too much of prerogative for the reform aimed at, sometimes even to ignoring the rights of other things. In a well planned course of study there are other branches just as dear to us as English, and it should be our aim to make the introduction into this course of anything new as little prejudicial to what is already legitimately there as possible.

No satisfactory agreement has yet been reached as to what constitutes English. Those most enthusiastic in urging its claims to greater prominence in our scheme of popular education are wide apart in their respective estimates of what its essentials are. In our attempt to find in the high school at least one year where this subject shall have a permanent place as a daily recitation, none of its salient features will be overlooked. By "first year English in the high school" is meant composition, literature, and oral reading, including whatever may be implied by these. This would mean elementary rhetoric with some attention to such matters as etymology, punctuation, figures of speech, style, and diction; the cultivation of a taste for classic literature by the study of a few of the best American authors; and the laying of the foundation of graceful and intelligent oral reading, with special attention to orthoepy, physical posture, elocution, and intelligent interpretation of thought.

The teaching of such English as this is not to require the services of an enthusiast or a prodigy for an instructor, one whose success is dependent upon his being swept along by a tide of inspiration, but it is to be done by ordinary teachers working within the usual limitations of their profession. If, as is usually the case, these teachers have not been trained for the work, they must learn to do by doing, as is often the case with the best teachers of other subjects.

Until recently English, as here outlined, was treated in the high school as something incidental, to receive attention once a week, or even less frequently, like music, drawing, or current topics. If rhetoric was taught as a regular daily class-room subject, it was for the benefit of only a few. What we are claiming in this paper is, that all high school students, of whatever course,

should have English as a first year study, and that it have the same amount of time and attention daily that is now given to algebra or Latin.

A few years ago complaints began to be made generally that the history of our own country was too much neglected in the public schools. Previously the public conscience had tried to quiet itself with the baseless theory, that the child obtains by general reading all that is desirable in this direction. It was found in fact that there is no such amount of general reading of history as had been claimed ; that the young rarely read history at all of their own accord. The usual period of preliminary agitation was passed through ; the public was at length sufficiently aroused in regard to the matter ; a permanent place for this important branch of study was found in the grammar school ; and, in consequence, the graduates from our grammar schools are now well informed about American History. Although a single year of English can accomplish but little when compared with the results of a year's study of American History, it would be a most significant little, to be felt appreciably ever after.

To make it worth the while, as has been said already, English must be taught somewhere in the course with the same insistence upon regular class room work as is the case with geometry. All things considered, the earlier this teaching comes in the high school the better. If placed in the first year, nearly three times as many would receive its benefits as would be the case if deferred until senior year, and it would make possible a greater degree of success with the subsequent incidental rhetorical work of the school. Moreover, the influence of this first year's discipline in English would be felt to advantage everywhere in the student's later career. Teachers of higher classes would then oftener experience satisfaction in finding boys and girls somewhat trained to write and punctuate, to appreciate literary excellence, and to give pleasure instead of pain when called upon to read or recite orally.

Fewer persons are fitted to teach English than almost any other important branch of study. As a rule young teachers are unwilling to take it, as they have not been sufficiently instructed in it themselves. As soon, however, as English shall be taught daily in the class room, and to all the pupils of a given year, just as Latin or algebra is taught, there will be produced, by a natural

process, competent teachers of English, and it will become a favorite subject with them, as by good right it ought to be. Rousseau, whose financial distress compelled him on one occasion to affect a calling for which he was not qualified, said : "By continuing to teach music I insensibly gained some knowledge of it."

There must be several teachers of first year English in a high school, just as there must be several to teach algebra. It would be well if all were to have the discipline that some teaching of English would give them. Their good influence for English would then be felt all along the course, as every subject affords more or less opportunity for it. Teachers of other branches too commonly decline to take notice of errors in English, such as mistakes of orthoepy in translating, and errors of punctuation in written exercises.

Fortunately we have quite lost confidence in the principle once held to some extent, that for the writing of good English it is only necessary to get something to say, and that then there will be no difficulty in saying it properly. One needs to be trained in literary composition just as he must be trained in anything else. Only now and then a genius, like Hawthorne, can dispense with passing through "the green age of apprenticeship" as a writer. You may have heard of the Bachelor of Arts who found it necessary to take a post-graduate course in spelling. Almost any college graduate might consistently take such a course in English. It is a common regret with educated men that they had not been stimulated in early life to write perseveringly, until they had formed the taste for literary composition.

If emphasis is to be put upon either composition or the study of literature in first year classes, it should be given to the former. Brief compositions should be required daily, or nearly so, and at first no subject is too simple to be successfully employed. It will be remembered that Swift could write elegantly about a broomstick. Several of these brief compositions should be read aloud and criticised by the teacher before the class each day, that all the members of the class may be benefited by the originality of each, as well as by the criticisms that accompany the reading. The compositions the teacher lacks time to read may often be assigned for correction to the most competent members of the class. Nearly the whole question of teaching composition writ-

ing in the schools, especially in its early stages, is expressed in this,—*regular daily class exercise, a part of which is to be the discussion by the teacher in the presence of the class of the work done.* By such daily contact with the individual student the teacher gets the surest revelation of the deficiencies of his class.

It is not to be expected that students so young as those entering the high school should pay much attention to style and invention, but rather to accurate and grammatical expression of common-place thought.

Literary composition is generally at the outset distasteful; but if persevered in, the student comes in time to have a liking for it, and finds, as often happens, that an acquired taste is stronger than a natural one. A good illustration of the utter helplessness of a beginner when set unaided to the task of writing a composition, is the case of a bright girl of thirteen, who chose "Religion" as her subject, and wrote as follows: "There are a great many kinds of religion. There is the Presbyterian religion, the Episcopalian religion, the Baptist religion, the Roman Catholic religion, the Unitarian religion, the Universalist religion, and the Methodist religion." This list exhausted the church denominations in her own village; but by enumerating others less familiar to her, and not forgetting the Mormons, she succeeded in reaching the required minimum limit of fifty words, and at length breathed freely in the consciousness of having achieved one of those terrible things called compositions.

The art of literary composition requires long and patient practice, intelligence that comes only by study, and mature judgment which nothing but time can fully develop. A French writer of great distinction says: "With whatever talent a man may be born, the art of writing is not easily learned." An experienced author was once asked if he would encourage young people in writing poetry. "By all means," he replied; "the poetry will, of course, be good for nothing; but the practice will be most helpful to them in forming the habit of careful thinking, and especially in giving them facility in diction, which will be of real use in their less ambitious efforts at prose."

The advisability of using a text-book in teaching first year composition is not quite established. This is a question to be decided by the individual teacher. While a few work best without one, probably the majority would prefer to use one; and possibly all would find it helpful, if it were not too much relied upon.

The amount of literature that can be studied in one year by boys and girls who have just entered the high school, especially when only a part of each daily recitation can be made available for it, is not large, and there is abundant material that may be profitably used for that purpose. Many American authors could be readily suggested, any one of whom, whether poet or prose-writer, would suffice. But the aim of the teacher, so far as this feature of English is concerned, should be to direct the student in such classic lines of reading as he is likely to follow perseveringly and voluntarily. Experience seems to show that the only literature likely to meet these conditions is prose fiction. As the study of literature in the class-room implies and necessitates much independent and voluntary reading by the pupil out of school, the teacher is at once called upon to find for his ambitious youthful readers a sufficiency of real classic fiction, attractive and pure, and consequently such as he may safely and confidently recommend to them. Such prose fiction as this is not abundant. Hardly any classic of this nature is wholly free from impurities, the best and most attractive in other respects often being the most vitiated. To become satisfied of this, let any one of you attempt to recommend to a girl of ravenous literary appetite unobjectionable classic fiction sufficient to supply her for a single year. Go to your own libraries and select the novels by the English masters, which you can consistently recommend to her. When it is stated that you are likely to begin by rejecting all of Thackeray, Scott, and Fielding, the real difficulty of the case becomes plain.

It seems like sacrilege to expurgate the works of such authors as Stern, Victor Hugo, and Bulwer, to make them safe reading for the young; but much may be said in favor of so doing. A teacher with the true literary spirit, in selecting reading for his pupils, will naturally choose a classic if possible; but as he must, nine times out of ten, select a story, and finds nearly all the stories written by classical authors containing what it would be imprudent to place before the unsophisticated reader, the necessity for some process of expurgation with the best novels becomes apparent. Even "Gulliver" has been successfully cleansed and made readable for the young. Great stress is laid upon fiction, because naturally the youthful taste is for stories, and it is wise to indulge this taste, if it can be done with what is strictly within the domain of literary art. Probably twenty young people will-

ingly read fiction for every one who reads standard history or poetry of his own accord. In a high school of five hundred it would be surprising if more than one were found who had read all of Wordsworth, or one even who had read all of Bancroft's History of the United States. This taste for history and poetry can be only moderately forced. Time alone develops it. I once knew a lawyer of decided literary taste who neglected to read *Hudibras* until he was quite advanced in years. He said he had always known that it was a great poem, because his cultivated father had early pointed it out to him as a book he would some day delight in.

For the successful taking up of some authors it makes a great difference at what place in his works one begins. As an introduction to Carlyle, "On Heroes" might charm a reader who would find his "French Revolution" hopelessly disgusting. A young person might be pleased with the "Blithedale Romance," who could see nothing of worth in the matchless introduction to the "Scarlet Letter."

The teacher of wide reading should make a lasting impression upon these boys and girls of fifteen, laying the foundation of what will later be a genuine literary culture. The amount of knowledge actually acquired may not be large; it will be like seed well sown, to come to an unfailling fruition later.

Oral reading is included among the essentials of first year English, because it is desirable that no educated person should be without this accomplishment. The extent to which our high schools neglect oral reading is deplorable. The observation once made by a critical teacher after a week of visitation in city high schools will not surprise any one,—that it was something of a consolation to know that the school she herself was connected with was not the only one that produced poor readers. It is of quite common observation that the best read student is the worst reader; just as it is often noticed that the man who leads his class writes a wretched hand.

Oral reading should form a part, perhaps a subordinate part, of first year English; if for nothing else, to form thoroughly the habit of a critical pronunciation of English. Moreover, good oral reading is an accomplishment to be coveted, even if our customary manner of educating holds it of but little value.

The pupil should be stimulated to practice oral reading daily

at home, thus supplementing the too meagre exercises of the school.

This plea for first year English in the high school is made upon the presumption that for the three remaining years of the course the usual attention to incidental rhetorical work will be fully sustained, and to a much better purpose. It is also believed that such an impulse will be given by this year of English in the way of literary culture, as shall last to enrich a lifetime.

The plan hastily outlined in this paper has been tried for nearly two years in the Worcester High School, and through the zeal and enlightened efforts of more than half a dozen teachers it has proved its worth. It has been favored by intelligent enthusiasm, an enthusiasm, which has been fostered by the formation of a Fortnightly English Club, in which there has been a free discussion of methods of procedure, by means of which the originality of the individual teacher could be freely copied and made available by all. A careful and frequent inspection of the peculiar excellence of each teacher's work by the principal, has also made it possible for him to present at these fortnightly meetings the good results observed. Several of these teachers, at the request of the principal, recently prepared statements of their impressions as to what is most essential to be done in classes of first year English. The substance of these impressions will now be presented as the conclusion of this paper.

I.—CONCERNING COMPOSITION WRITING.

Insist upon daily work in composition. This is the all-important feature.

Aim at developing the ability to think clearly, and a facility in writing accurate—not necessarily elegant—English.

Insist upon correct paragraphing in all original work.

Let the pupils to some extent, correct one another's written work, especially after the teacher has criticised as many papers as practicable before the class.

Require all corrected compositions to be re-written in accordance with suggestions of the teacher.

In marking them use a system of signs, and place the characters in the margin, leaving the pupil to find his errors for himself.

Teach clearness and unity, and the common figures of speech.

Correct in the class a great variety of faulty sentences.

Require the learning of essential rules for punctuation, and illustrate each by examples.

At first have the pupil write short compositions, not continuous, some of them on subjects that cannot be "looked up." Then require longer ones, continuous from day to day, upon books read outside the class.

II.—CONCERNING LITERATURE.

Require daily in the class a certain amount of study of some American author.

Require much reading in the class and in private, what is read being frequently reported orally to the class.

Require committing to memory of beautiful selections.

Cultivate in the pupil the habit of looking carefully to the authority of a statement.

See that the pupil acquires the ability to locate quickly the difficulty in the failure to understand any sentence.

Be sure to make a beginning in the cultivation of the literary taste, and of a desire to read only the best.

Dictate, as a part of the advance lesson, questions which will compel the pupil to think out the answers.

The looking up of allusions is valuable, but too much of such work wearies young pupils. Make this subordinate to work which will stimulate their imagination and arouse a liking for the beautiful in literature and nature.

Give written lessons on the plot, characters, and figurative or obscure expressions after study of a selection.

III.—CONCERNING ORAL READING.

Devote some small portion of each recitation to oral reading, and, if possible, have each pupil read aloud daily at home.

Require reading and reciting from the platform.

Give some attention to suffixes and prefixes, and to the derivation of words.

Require the defining of new words, to enlarge the pupils vocabulary; old words, to make his knowledge accurate.

Have the pupil acquire the power to read at sight without blundering, as well as secure a working knowledge of the strict meaning of words.

—*J. G. Wright.*

Classical High School, Worcester, Mass.