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TEACHING CIVICS AS A SCIENCE IN THE JOLIET TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

By R. R. SMITH

In the first place the reader must believe that civics is a science. If he is in the least doubt concerning the matter, he should consult an unabridged edition of Webster at once. He will find the subject classified as a science. He will furthermore find that science is knowledge duly organized and systematized. This definition certainly applies to civics which is supposed to place before the student an organized and systematized knowledge of government, a knowledge which has been gained from a study of history.

Now we come to this interesting syllogism which the reader is cordially invited to tear into fragments if he can; (1) science should be taught by the laboratory method; (2) civics is a science; (3) civics should be taught by the laboratory method.

There is not likely a teacher so antiquated that he will deny the truth of the major premise, although it took humanity almost 1900 years to stumble upon its truth by the inductive method of accidental observation, an expensive scientific method which has been too much in vogue for humanity's good. There is not likely a teacher who will deny the verity of Webster, or who will deny that the definition of science is applicable to civics; so our minor premise is safe.

The conclusion must follow. We have no choice in the matter.

Naturally, with such a syllogism in my mind, I have always believed in pupil self-government from the purely scientific basis which means that I have believed in it as a disciplinary measure as well.

When I came to Joliet Township High School four years ago I came not only with that syllogism in my mind, but with a number of successful experiments in smaller schools to my credit.

On analysis of the larger school conditions two things were apparent: (1) the school needed the stimulus which can come only when the governed have a share in the government; (2) the only difficulty in the way of organizing the larger school was getting a working unit.

However, popular government comes as a result of growth on the part of the body politic toward a desire for such a government. Believing that, I went to work systematically to build up a sentiment in favor of student government among the students themselves.

I talked student government among the students; I taught student government in my classes. I organized a club which died. I organized the senior class in order to bring the pressure of the majority of the class upon a minority who insisted upon using the high school column in the local paper for personalities of a very inane and deplorable sort—an organization which came near losing my job for me. Since this is a history of facts I owe it to the two boys in question to state that since then they have become very reputable newspaper men and are, as I have reason to think, my friends. I organized an English class into a club a report of which has already appeared. [See Bulletin of Illinois Association of Teachers of English of the Kewpy Club, Sept., 1917.]

The propaganda worked as propaganda will. The present senior class was not greatly affected. They are still inclined to scoff at the idea of self-government and to take it as their right to be knocked down—a state of mind which means that they rebel at being confronted by real problems to solve. But the present junior class would organize their room in a minute if allowed to, and one group, the 8th period one, is in a fair way of being allowed to. The sophomore class are ready for self-government as are the freshmen.

It is with a group of these sophomores that the paper has to deal. However, I must explain that shortly after coming here, I was given charge of one of the large home rooms which is used also for a study room. This is largely a sophomore room and here the sophomores study each of their twelve periods during the day.

At the close of last semester I asked that I be given permission to organize each of the twelve study periods for student government, but I was not permitted to do so. However, I was given charge of the twelfth period myself.

As I was doing an immense amount of war work outside of my regular school activities, and was manager of athletics in addition, I needed the period for myself. Consequently I immediately placed the proposition of government before the students. They responded in the affirmative.

I would like to state at this point that for success in a large school the machinery of the system must be simple. There is not time for the old New England town meeting type of procedure, as there is in a small school.

Our procedure was simplicity itself. Acting on the affirmative answer given, I drew up the following pledge which each

student signed: "We the students seated in room 329 the 12th period, hereby pledge ourselves individually and through our officers to keep the room in order." Our next step was to elect four students to take charge of the room. Two students were to look after the discipline and two were to do the clerical work. The two sets were to be on duty on alternate weeks.

No new rules were made. Throughout the time I have been in charge I have preached "Think of the other fellow." I have insisted that students move quietly.

The principal rules in force in all study rooms are these: (1) pupils may leave the room only with duly signed pass blanks; (2) pupils who wish to speak must come to the desk for permission. These two rules reduce the confusion to a minimum.

The experiment has worked. The order has been as good as if a teacher were in the room. The morale has been much better. There have been no cases of discipline which the students in charge cannot handle.

Of the two students in charge, one is superior in every way. She is popular with the students. She is popular with the teachers—She makes high grades. The training in leadership has been of great value to her just as such training is always when it is real training.

The other student is bright enough. The fact that he is able to handle the room shows his ability. But he does not fit into the school machine so far. However, his grades have been no worse than last semester and his self-control is much better. An incident which happened not long ago is illustrative. Misunderstanding came up between him and a teacher. Because, through his self-government training, he had learned to check his emotions and make himself give his final decision as a result of reason, he was able to meet the teacher in question, talk over the situation, and come to an adjustment. Without such training he would have left the school in anger.

What the immediate future of pupil government here will be I do not know. But the American high school can do no greater service to the nation than to prepare its students to govern themselves sanely. Civics is a science hence should be taught by the laboratory method. In every high school in the United States there are from one to five big study halls that are by nature civics laboratories. To utilize these study halls as civics laboratories would not incur additional expense but would save many thousands of dollars in teachers' salaries. Is not failure to utilize this waste material an indictment against America's intelligence? Is it not really an invitation for the Kaiser to come and take up his government of the nation as an autocracy?