

TEACHING AND STUDY

DR. THEODORE B. NOSS

Principal of the State Normal School, California, Pa.

In what order should these school exercises occur, and what should be the nature of each? Should the teacher be in fact what he is in name, a teacher of lessons, or merely a hearer of lessons learned from some other source? Should the textbook be in fact what it is in name, a text, or should it be the whole sermon? Should the textbook supplement the teacher, or the teacher the textbook? In short, should a new lesson be studied by the pupil before it is taught, or after? Common usage says, before. Does not good pedagogy say, after?

Of course, if the teacher does not know his subject and does not know how to teach, he should assign his lessons, in advance, in a good textbook, and stick close to the book—the closer the better. But it is unfortunate that the necessities of the poor teacher should set the pace and fix a habit for all teachers. The common practice of assigning advance lessons to be studied in a book and then recited to the teacher never sprang from the strength of teachers, but from their weakness. In Germany, for example, where for two or three generations teachers as a rule have been well prepared, no such custom is in vogue. Wherever the teaching art is seen at its best, in primary school or university, or any grade between, the teacher teaches the lessons; but wherever teaching becomes mechanized and the teacher a degenerate, he takes to the book as a duck to the water. He can't fly much, but he can swim all day. He can't teach well, but he can hear lessons "recited" and make timely suggestions and corrections.

"Hearing" lessons is hardly legitimate business for one who holds a license to teach. A license to hear would seem to be all that he is fairly entitled to. The very word "recite," when applied to such subjects as arithmetic, grammar, history, and the

like, provokes the wrath of the "born" teacher, for the better the pupil recites, the less he knows. To recite gems of literature is a beautiful exercise, but to recite grammar and geography is abominable. If a pupil is caught at it, he should be rebuked for false pretense and contempt for his teacher.

Yet teachers may be found who do not frown upon, but encourage, such practices. A fourteen-year-old girl attending a city public school told me recently that she had memorized the first half of her textbook in United States history; that her teacher expected the class to recite the language of the book word for word; and that she had one day been told to sit down because she used the words "ships sailed" where the book had it "ships coasted." No such unwarranted liberties with the book could be permitted.

This teacher may have been more conscientious and consistent than most teachers in the use of the textbook method for the preparation of lessons, but is not the method itself fundamentally wrong? The teacher's place is not at the rear, but in the front. If a horse is a thoroughbred and every way worthy of the honor, he ought to be in advance of the cart.

SOME OBJECTIONS TO THIS ORDER

Some plausible reasons have been found for having pupils study their lessons before the teacher teaches them.

1. It is claimed that the pupil gains more self-reliance by learning his lesson from a book without the help of the teacher. It is not made quite clear, however, what virtue the book possesses over a good teacher for inculcating the noble quality of self-reliance. Neither is it obvious that a pupil is more likely to be inspired with self-reliance by a teacher who depends upon the book than by one who exemplifies this virtue in his own teaching.

The pupil needs all the help he can get from both teacher and book, but he should have the teacher first. If he does not need the teacher at the point of greatest difficulty and danger, viz., in attacking the new lesson, why should he have him at all?

2. Objection is made that it takes too much time to have the class study the new lesson with the teacher, and that it is better

for the class to learn all they can from the book, and then let the teacher make an inventory of what each one has discovered, correct his errors and supply what is lacking.

This is so plausible in theory and so convenient in practice that no one is likely to object to it except a teacher. He objects rather strenuously, if he has an artistic temperament and is disposed to magnify his office. He thinks the element of inspiration is not sufficiently provided for in the pupil's self-study of the new lesson in a book. He is conceited enough to believe that he has a better chance than the book to arouse interest, clarify vision, and direct the efforts of the pupil. He argues that ordinary book-study lacks any good, definite aim, and encourages several bad aims, such as class standing, working for answers, for grades, etc. In contrast with this, he would make his method one of thought-study. He would have the lesson analyzed and digested, rather than memorized. He would not measure progress by pages, but rather by interests, clear knowledge, skill in doing things. He would teach every subject in its direct bearing on the life of the pupil, and would lay stress on all that affects personality and molds character. His method might not seem so speedy, but it is sure, and the results are lasting. I once conversed with an old man—nearly ninety years of age—Baron de Guimps, the last surviving pupil of Pestalozzi. In defending his great teacher against the charge, made by some of his contemporaries, that he was unsystematic and did not make sufficient use of repetition and review, he said: "What Pestalozzi taught once he never needed to repeat."

3. A further objection is made that if the teacher teaches the new lesson, there is nothing left for the pupil to do. But such is not the case. Teaching is not a mere recital of facts. That is more the nature of the book method. There is little choice between a teacher that tells everything and a book that does so. Teaching is a process that requires the active co-operation of both teacher and pupil.

Teaching is causing another to learn. The pupil co-works with the teacher in the discovery of truth. The teacher has really taught the lesson only when the pupil has learned it. After the

lesson has been taught by the teacher, it is carefully reviewed in the book or books by the pupil, and is then reproduced in outline in an orderly way, in neat and correct written form, for the teacher. Much new matter may also be added in the way of illustrations and examples. In all this, however, there need be no groping or wasting of time in study hours.

4. Some teachers have a fear that the teaching of the advance lesson by the teacher makes learning too easy. If this fear is well grounded, we are on the verge of a great discovery—an easier method of learning. What man of practical turn of mind would not take his children, and go himself, to a teacher who would make it easier to learn? Who first conceived the idea that in education the shorter road must be avoided, and the longer one chosen, for the sake of mental discipline? And yet, what we contend for is not that learning should be made easy, but that it should be made fruitful. Make it harder, if you choose, but make it pay. Children like to work hard, if there is sufficient motive; but work without motive never makes a scholar or artist, only a slave.

No wise parent would exempt his son from effort, but to have his effort rewarded by learning twice or thrice as much would be an unmixed blessing. Anything that increases friction and causes delay and worry, in lesson preparation, is in itself a bane, not a blessing. There is so much to learn, and school life is so short that the easiest method of learning is quite hard enough. The old prejudice against short-cuts in education, such as the use of algebra to help the arithmetic, the educational use of pictures, etc., has given way somewhat, and there is a growing conviction that the simplest, clearest, and quickest method of teaching is the one to be chosen. Is it not curious that this should ever have been doubted?

THE TEACHING OF THE ADVANCE LESSON

It is here contended that the new lesson should regularly be taught in the classroom before it is assigned for study; that the new subject should first come to the mind of the pupil through the mind of the teacher; that the pupil's study of a lesson is made

more intelligent, interesting, and fruitful by the preview which the teacher gives; and that nothing short of this can strictly be called teaching. Among the reasons that might be given for this claim are the following:

1. The pupil needs help in the study of the new lesson, if he ever needs it. The ability to learn, unaided, new lessons is not an innate nor an early endowment, but is, in fact, one of the latest and best products of school life. Doubtless many adult students in secondary schools waste half of their time in study hours because of groping and guessing. The mental habits acquired by such work and worry are the opposite of what we seek. The logical place and the psychological moment for the teaching of the new lesson are when the pupil first comes to it. The true teacher, like the good shepherd, goes before his flock. If there are dangers and difficulties, he must be the first to see them. If we hire a guide at all, we want him when we first go through the woods.

The task of reciting a lesson is an easy matter, if one knows the lesson. The teacher's aid could better be spared here than in the study of the lesson.

2. Lessons learned entirely from the book are apt to tax the memory unduly to the neglect of more important powers. In teaching new subject-matter the teacher can cultivate the habits of close attention, correct reasoning, and good expression. It is easier to teach a new lesson successfully than an old one.

If the lesson is alike new to all, the needs and interests of all are much the same, but such is not the case when pupils of varying abilities have studied the new lesson with various degrees of thoroughness. They are now unfitted rather than prepared to recite the lesson together. What is new to some is old to others. The recitation is more likely to beget indifference than interest. Little room is left for interests that are spontaneous and natural, interests that relate to the subject itself; and the exercise usually degenerates into a sort of cram and absorption of mind with artificial values.

It is an evidence of the robust health and sanity of the minds of children that so many of them survive the deadening processes of the so-called "recitation."

3. First impressions are most vivid and lasting. In the teaching of a lesson a teacher should not lose his case by a bad beginning. If he opens up the new subject himself, he can direct and train the minds of his pupils according to his will and skill, but to insure success all conditions should be favorable. What could be more harmful than to have a class roaming over the new lesson, in advance, like a herd of cattle turned into a new pasture field? Not only should the teacher not drive his class ahead of himself in this unskilful way, but he should try to prevent this anticipation of his work.

4. A teacher's work consists chiefly in teaching truth or correcting errors. It is mainly the former when he teaches each new lesson himself; it is mainly the latter when lessons are merely assigned in a book. Good teaching is not the art of correcting mistakes, but of preventing them. It is only the habit of accuracy that pupils need to form. Many teachers seem to become enamored of mistakes, and to live in an atmosphere of false syntax, false spelling, false pronunciation, false everything. They know all that the pupil should not know. The teacher's time should not be devoted to extricating the pupil from the bog of error; he should keep him from falling in. The slime of error cannot be so cleaned off that it does not leave some stain. The far-sighted teacher has about the same theory for mistakes that a farmer has for Canada thistles.

No wise teacher will make it easy for the pupil to miss the road. Very often, when the pupil makes mistakes, the teacher is to blame. There is some justification for a custom, said to exist in China, according to which, when a man commits a crime, his teacher is beheaded.

Teaching by preventing errors is more economical of time and effort, and more pedagogically sane, than the process of correcting mistakes. Mistakes are costly. A celebrated Greek music teacher charged double tuition to those who had taken lessons from another teacher — one-half for correcting mistakes. The maxim of Jean Paul Richter is a good one: "Look only on the best, and the good will soon appear."

A gifted teacher is an artist as truly as is a painter or an

orator. He also makes pictures that should be imperishable treasures on memory's walls. Anything that spoils his pictures is repugnant to him. Unguided study is sure to spoil them. The teacher who turns a class loose to roam unguided over a new lesson is like the thriftless farmer who cares not whether his seed wheat is pure or mixed. The engineers who have tunneled the Alps, and the architects who have built the great cathedrals, would all have failed if they had used the slovenly art of the teacher who devotes his time and skill to correcting errors instead of teaching truth. All high art, including teaching, loves precision. Mistakes are costly, and the teacher should plan to prevent them. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

5. The tendency in a textbook preparation of lessons is to narrow the scope of school work to a few subjects formally treated in the book, while things perhaps of greater importance to the pupil, to the home, and to the community are completely ignored. School should not be merely a knowledge shop where facts, mostly unrelated and uninteresting, are dispensed, but a place that adds to the enjoyments and increases the usefulness of all connected with the school. The pastimes of the home, conversation, story-telling, games, conundrums, etc., should not be so foreign to the routine of the school. Music, art, and current literature should have attention. The school should create interest in things worth knowing and impart skill in things worth doing. There is need of a larger use of knowledge and of less indiscriminate cramming, and for this the teacher's art is required. Most pupils need training in the art of seeing and doing the right things. It is harder for them to use their knowledge than to get it. Their time has been so occupied with a kind of sordid and selfish devouring of facts that their minds are closed to the best things in life. They need to realize that mere knowledge-stuffing is vulgar; that to have a great quantity of facts or money for which one has no use is not very laudable; and that, as some one has said, the maxim, "Learn all you can," is about as wise as "Eat all you can." It is the mental training which the pupil gets rather than the knowledge which he accumulates that is of greatest importance.

Real success depends chiefly on the method of study. This should emphasize quality rather than quantity. Unifying thoughts should be made prominent, minor matters secondary, and unrelating things, as a rule, omitted.

All this work of selection and relative stress should be turned over, not to the immature pupil, but to the skilful and experienced teacher. The textbook is all right in its place, and is indispensable, but it is no substitute for a good teacher. As a rule, textbooks should be much smaller in size, and teachers much larger in gifts and capacities. When we reach the golden age of pedagogy, the textbook will be a book of texts (outlines, problems, etc.), and the teacher will be a man or woman who teaches rather than hears lessons.