

* Special Papers. *

* SOME WAYS OF MAKING
"ENGLISH" MORE VALUABLE
EDUCATIONALLY.

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WHEN asked to state the subject of a paper to be read before this meeting of the Modern Language Association, on the spur of the moment I chose the subject given on the printed programme "The Educational Value of 'English.'" To-day I ask permission to change this title; not because I found that little could be said under the old heading, for I daily grow more convinced that no study affords greater disciplinary advantages than does English; but because it seemed that the members of this Association would, as well as myself, understand these advantages and that I therefore would merely be bringing the symbolical coals to Newcastle. I have decided to ask you to allow me to occupy a few moments of your time in the consideration of some suggestions on the ways by which we may make the teaching of English even more valuable educationally. These suggestions, it is needless perhaps to say, have occurred to me as a result of my experience as a teacher of the subject.

In the first place: I think we do not do enough *oral* work of a certain kind. As language is spoken to a far greater extent than it is written, it goes without question that it is of more advantage to be able to speak than to be able to write. This fact we have either forgotten or neglected in our teaching of English. We have given much time to the consideration of written English, some to the expression of thought in written symbols, but have, I think, given very little to a similar expression by means of spoken language. There are two almost untilled fields of oral English for us to begin to cultivate. First *Conversation*, and second, what for lack of a better name, I may call *Oratorical composition*.

We all, I am sure, admire and envy the good conversationalist, the man or woman that can say an ordinary thing in a pleasant and interesting way. How often is it the case that a man of good thinking powers, great breadth of knowledge, and worth of character, is unable to converse with satisfaction to himself or profit or pleasure to others? Now, while the conversational faculty, like every other, is largely a gift, I have no hesitation in stating that it may be greatly strengthened and developed by proper exercise. The place for this exercise is, of course, at home, but in the failure of the home to do its duty the school-master has to step in with his magic and power. But there is a limit to all his power and all his magic, and the question arises, "How can the school-master be of service in this matter?" In the first place, by himself learning to appreciate the value and the urgent need of proper methods of conversing. Most boys and girls fall into bad habits of conversation because they do not deem it essential to be careful; there is a common feeling that it does not matter

how we speak so long as we convey in some more or less adequate way our meaning. By a change in this feeling, a change in the manner and matter of conversation is accomplished. It is a first duty, therefore, of every teacher, but especially of every "English" teacher, to impress upon boys and girls the necessity of taking pains with their speech. Words express thought, and thought, if not the man, is the most important part of him. When a boy talks he is giving himself and revealing his character to his listener. How careful he should therefore be to speak worthily of himself. In a thousand ways a teacher can enforce the necessity of right speaking. By his own attention to his own speech, by apologizing for an imperfect or lazy pronunciation, by his correction of his own slipshod sentences he can do much. To insist always on pure English words, on clear pronunciation, and complete sentences; to reprove the jumbling of syllables or words, indistinct articulation, and the violation through unseemly hurry of all the laws of syntactical construction, will in a short time effect a radical change. The dictionary, unused before, will be voluntarily referred to, to find the meaning and customary pronunciation of words; the directions of the teacher to books containing advice on the matter of conversation will be gladly followed; his account of the conversational powers of noted men and women will be listened to with interest, and selections from the conversational portions of our great writers will be carefully examined. In short, if boys and girls appreciate the importance of conversation, its meaning and its power, they will take pains to speak as becomes intelligent human beings.

The preceding paragraph may appear to some fanciful and unnecessary, but I am convinced that, if we may judge from the ordinary talk in the home or on the street, one of the very best things we can do is to get our young people to speak plainly and distinctly and with pleasant variety of pitch and tone; and to acquire the habit of finishing one sentence before undertaking another, in other words, to banish all the lazy, slipshod habits of speech so easily acquired in schooldays and so painfully broken in after life.

Again: I think that in most schools too little attention is paid to oral or extempore composition. There are few things harder to introduce into a class than this, especially if it be on a set theme. Yet no exercise can be much more profitable. For it encourages confidence in one's power to think when speaking, a confidence that many a man would give much to possess. It also begets a readiness, a celerity of decision, on matters of debate, a quickness of judgment that is almost invaluable. The exercise will at first necessarily be short, and will deal with subjects well known and of interest to all. It will sometimes be well to have a subject given beforehand for preparation, and sometimes more profitable to have it laid before the class without notice. As the class becomes used to this kind of work it will grow interested and will be in a position to undertake more pretentious exercises in the way of debates and general discussions. I have found it

advantageous, for class and teacher to select in conjunction a subject, to look into it, understand its bearings, and decide as to the lines along which it should be argued. Time spent in this way will be far from wasted, even if some other study has to be neglected, for the result will be that our boys and girls will learn, not only to judge concerning the validity of arguments presented on any subject, but also to look beneath the surface in considering any debated question, to find the point on which the decision hinges, and to present in plain and simple fashion their own conclusions. The ready confidence, the skill in arguing, the ability to gather information from all quarters, the wide knowledge of things, the enlarged vocabulary thus obtained, are each as valuable as anything acquirable at school. I know it may be argued that I am making a Literary Society of the English class. Whether this be so or not it matters not, for it might be a good thing if we had more of the literary society in our schools. And that this work can be overtaken by the ordinary literary society seems to me to be out of the question. Its meetings are too infrequent and its proceedings, though extremely valuable educationally, are often concerned with matters that we can by no stretch of imagination include under the title of "English." Moreover, the literary society, unless—as is best, but not usual—it is controlled by the school authorities, affords opportunities in some sense not only for improvement, but also for debasement. For, unless corrected and helped, every student will only be confirmed in his mannerisms and faulty ways of presenting his thoughts.

To the extent of the work included in *oral* composition there is practically no limit, and therefore its utility is exceedingly great. Nearly every mental power may be trained and strengthened by it. Whether it be an oral account, off-hand or prepared, of an ordinary incident, or ceremony, whether it be the oral expansion or condensation of a story, or the oral description of a landscape or a work of art, it will be found in many ways most valuable. It may extend from the description of what took place on the way to school, to a speech to an imaginary parliament, or to the narration of an imagined story, but whatever it is it results in increased intellectual, emotional and artistic power. Half an hour so spent daily in our Public and High schools, could not fail to accomplish great things, and lectures so conducted in the universities would be delightful, profitable and popular.

Again: I think we often fail because of lack of effort or opportunity to guide the reading of our students. Though they complain very bitterly of their lack of time to prepare their lessons, I am certain that they do a vast amount of outside reading—often of the most unhealthful kind. Boys and girls—if they are the same now as they used to be—do themselves permanent harm by indulging in not only the harmful reading of bad books, but in the harmful reading of good books. It is the duty of the English master to teach his pupils how to read a book properly. This can best be done by showing them how improperly they generally use a book. Let any class be asked

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