

* Special Papers. *

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL LESSON.

E. P. HUGHES, in *The Journal of Pedagogy*.

THE process of education is something much more than the giving of lessons. A teacher may be capable of producing excellent lessons, and yet be by no means an excellent educator. Still, lesson-giving is a large part of the work of the day-school teacher, and it is universally accepted as one of the chief means of education. It is, therefore, worth our while to concentrate our attention on it.

One of the most hopeful signs in English secondary education at the present time is the ever-swelling discontent among teachers as to the level of teaching skill at present reached by us. We are not at all satisfied with our performances as lesson-givers, and we want to grow more skilful. Many of us are somewhat vague as to how that end is to be attained, and those who have fairly clear ideas on that subject disagree among themselves as to the best means to be employed; but, at any rate many of us have taken the first step—glorious discontent. In the days fast passing away there were two rough-and-ready methods largely used to gain teaching skill: the first was to go to a class and teach as best you could, until you could teach it in the right way—an extravagant method, extravagant in time and energy and failure, for both teacher and pupil. Another method, not so commonly used, was to go and hear good teachers teach. To this there are two obvious difficulties—(1) many schools are still organized so that a teacher is never free during lesson time, and (2) there are still teachers who refuse to allow others to hear them teach. What other means are left to us? Many, I think, but to-day we will only consider one—the calm consideration of the abstract question, outside our class-rooms, in such a manner that the result of our thinking may affect our teaching.

There is an obvious advantage in discussing the question in as general a manner as possible. (1) Knowledge so expressed, *i. e.*, general knowledge, is much more emphatic, likely to arrest our attention, and to remain in our memory, and, therefore, more likely to affect our action. (2) It is a great safeguard to express knowledge in as general a form as possible, because we often detect errors in so doing. (3) General knowledge is the most convenient form in which to carry knowledge, because it is the most concise. On the other hand, the more abstract the consideration, unless one has plenty of examples to illustrate it, the less likely one is to apply it to practical life. I will consider the question of lesson-giving in as general a manner as possible, and ignore differences of subject, differences of pupils, and differences of conditions. After all, there are certain elements which are always present in every lesson. There is always a teacher, always pupils, and we must have a subject.

I will enumerate twenty characteristics which appear to me to be essential to an ideal lesson:—

1. The teacher must know what result he wants to gain from the lesson—*i. e.*, the ideal lesson has a definite end. This really seems obvious. I feel inclined to apologize for bringing it forward, but I do so because I constantly ask teachers what is the result they are trying to gain, and they do not know. Educating is a very hard task. To do it well we must expend an enormous amount of time and energy, and so must our pupils. Surely it is not rational to expend this without considering the end which we wish to attain. I do not sympathize much with a teacher who frankly confessed to me the other day—"My object is to get my boys through certain examinations. Their parents have sent them to me for that purpose, and that is my end." I do not sympathize with him, but I know the chances are that he will gain his end, because he knows what he wants to gain; and his career is rational, if it is not noble.

2. An ideal lesson must have a threefold result on the pupil—(1) an increase of right motive power; (2) an increase of intellectual power; (3) an increase of organized knowledge. I have put the third last, because I consider it the least important.

It is more important for the schoolboy to want to learn, and to know how to learn, than to gain learning in school days. Obviously, however, the three parts of the result are by no means contra-

dictory; in fact they are immediately connected, *if you begin at the right end*. Alas! one can begin at the wrong end, and then there is no necessary connection. We can give knowledge to a boy in such a way that we have decreased rather than increased, his desire for knowledge. We can also give knowledge so badly (*e. g.*, using an inaccurate form of reasoning) that we deaden rather than develop a boy's powers. To speak frankly, this is no doubt done, otherwise we should not have to mourn, as we do at present, over the absence of much real love for learning in our secondary schools. A small boy said to me the other day, "I hate lessons, but I love school, because there are the games, and the fun of being with a lot of boys, and the fun of trying to dodge the masters. We put up with the lessons for the sake of the rest." I feel sure he had not been receiving ideal lessons. If we begin at the right end, all good things follow. If we, first of all, aim at teaching them in such a way as to exercise all their powers, the third result—accurate, well organized knowledge—will inevitably follow. Mere instruction is passing out of fashion. We talk a great deal now about the development of all the faculties; but this is not enough. We do not want a good mental machine, capable of excellent work, but we want steam to drive it. I do not think we teachers expend sufficient thought and energy on developing strong and right motive power. Whatever may be the subject of a lesson, and whatever the conditions, the ideal lesson will obtain the threefold result.

3. An ideal lesson must be complete in itself. We must have a beginning, a middle and an end. I know this is regarded as a fad of Training College officials, but I feel sure it is a means of quick progress. Some lessons are obviously more isolated than others, but each series of lessons, however intimately connected, is a string of *wholes*. How many teachers go on with their lessons till the bell rings? and if it had rung five minutes earlier, or five minutes later, it would not have affected the artistic unity of the lesson, because it had none. I feel sure that the teacher is refreshed and rested by getting through what she meant to do, and the class is stimulated also by seeing that the lesson is complete and finished. When the divisions are not obviously suggested by the subject, it is desirable to use devices to isolate the different parts. I believe it is an innate quality of the normal person to find it easiest to take food in definite spoonfuls, be it physical or mental food. So much for the subject-matter of each lesson, which I suggest should have a certain amount of completeness in itself.

But when I plead for the artistic completeness of a lesson, I mean more than this. I mean that it should have a beginning and an end, as well as a clearly-defined middle part. There are very few of us who can plunge at once, with all possible vigor, into a subject that someone else chooses we shall study; sometimes we find it hard to do this even when we choose the subject ourselves. It is, of course, far more difficult for children to make a good and rapid beginning than for adults. Many a good lesson has been spoiled because it began too soon—*i. e.*, before the children had been properly prepared to begin, prepared both in knowledge and state of mind. I remember a volunteer officer telling me once that he always spent the first few minutes of drill in speaking to his men. He did this because they had been employed in different kinds of work during the day, and it was necessary that their minds should be brought round to the subject in hand. Also, they had not been working together during the day, and now he wanted them to work together as one man. In other words, he believed in having an introduction to the lesson, and so do I. An ideal lesson does not really begin until all the members of the class are ready to work together as one man, and until their minds are concentrated on what they are going to learn.

The ideal lesson must also have a proper and complete ending. Assuming that our pupils have gained in motive power, faculty, and knowledge, our campaign is over: let us count up the gains. For the sake of the teacher, let us see what the pupils have accomplished; and also, for the sake of the class, let us increase their desire to learn by making them notice what they have obtained in knowledge and power during the lesson.

4. The ideal lesson must be vitally connected with a series of lessons. The quickest way to ascend a steep mountain is to take a number of

small steps, *as long as every step tells*. The ideal teacher advances slowly, but advances constantly. The pupil of a famous teacher once said: "We seem to do so little in each part of a lesson, and yet at the end of a lesson we see how far we have travelled, and at the end of the term one is astonished to find how much knowledge we have gained, and yet we seem to have advanced so slowly." There are many teachers who begin a term's work and have no complete idea of what they mean to teach in the term. Surely, the ideal theory is to draw out a rough syllabus of the term's work, probably of the year's work. A detailed syllabus would perhaps be undesirable and hampering, it might prevent us from being sufficiently guided by the powers of the class, or by one's new reading and thinking. A rough syllabus makes our teaching far more orderly and systematic. It is a convenient guide for our own reading and thinking, and it frequently prevents us from giving a wrong amount of time to a particular part of our subject.

5. The ideal lesson must be preceded and followed by private work. I would lay great stress on this. Our pupils must have the opportunity of private and solitary work, and I do not mean mere memory or mechanical work. Occasionally the following kind of lesson is given. The children can do it without having done any work themselves. A kind of lecture is given to them, a mass of condensed and simplified knowledge is ladled out in paragraphs. The children write notes during the lesson, and occasionally there is a question or two. After the lesson the pupils sometimes write out the notes fully, and anyhow learn them. This may be, and perhaps is, the most expeditious way of preparing for an examination not of a very severe nature, but it is a poor preparation for the days when we hope our pupils will work for themselves without help from teacher or lecturer. Are we doing all we can to prove to our pupils that it is ever so much pleasanter and better to get knowledge for ourselves rather than to have it given to us? Are we not rather turning them into intellectual paupers, dependent on others for knowledge? Are we not producing a class of students who find it difficult to study anything unless they have the stimulation of a course of lectures? I never heard of any one getting a thorough knowledge of any subject merely by lectures. It is true an able teacher can give us help of a very special kind, but this value is great because he can do for us what books fail to do, and what we cannot do for ourselves. Let us teach our pupils from the first: "Always try yourself to gain knowledge before you go to others for help;" "Never go to a class or lecture without doing all *you* can before you go; you will then be in a fit state to learn, you will not be pauperized but stimulated by the help you obtain, and you will be inevitably spurred on to work for yourself afterwards." It is a good rule always to give a class some work to do before a lesson or lecture, either to get material which otherwise would have to be given them, or to revise old knowledge which will be required, or to lead their thoughts to the central idea of the lesson. A great deal of variety is, of course, possible in this preparatory work; *e. g.*, an historical novel is often a good introduction to a history course. It is desirable that the pupils should regard a lesson as a jewel which requires a setting of private work. As we all know, it is private work that really counts most in intellectual progress, knowledge and mental power. The real success of a lesson can often be largely tested by the private work of the pupil after it. The older the pupil, obviously the greater freedom and choice is possible in the private work, and greater demand can be made for original thought. We hear many complaints now-a-days about home-work, and it is sometimes suggested that we should have no home-work. If it should be given up, obviously part of the time in school will have to be spent in private work, and we must have longer hours. We cannot educate pupils without this factor of private work.

6. The ideal lesson must be connected with the *life* of the child. The children in our day schools are with us for a few hours only each day. Outside that time, they have other interests, other needs, other conditions. I think the only perfect life is a kind of double life—one strong and absorbing interest, and outside that, many other interests. For instance, a business man who is only a business man is a miserable sort of a man. The medical man who is only a doctor, and nothing else, *may*