

TEACHERS' CONVENTION.

Address Delivered by W. R. Miller, on Questioning and Answering.

The following address was delivered at the recent West Huron Teachers' Convention by Mr. W. R. Miller, Principal of Goderich Central School:

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—In dealing with the subject of Questioning and Answering I propose to briefly discuss, 1st. The importance of a proper system of questioning, and how proficiency may be attained. 2nd. To offer some general observations on what I consider to be proper and what to be improper styles of questioning and answering. I look upon questioning as the most important part of the teacher's work since to this all other parts converge, or from it diverge and failure here necessarily, very materially affects his success as a teacher.

To rightly estimate the importance of the art of questioning it is only necessary to consider the different purposes which it serves. What is commonly called Tentative or Preliminary Questioning has for its objects 1st. To discover the extent of the knowledge possessed by the pupil in reference to the subject about to be taught, so that the teacher may adapt his instruction to the child's wants and avoid wasting time by attempting to teach what the pupils already know. 2nd. That the teacher may utilize the information already acquired as a foundation on which to build additional knowledge.

By a brief series of searching questions the teacher is able to fix the limit between the known and unknown, and to put the class in a condition to receive and master the knowledge he has in store for them.

The most important objects of questioning are the development and cultivation of the intellectual faculties. These objects are attained principally by what is called Socratic or instructive questioning which leads the pupil to discover truth for himself. This system carries the pupil along a succession of steps by which he is brought to see the facts we wish him to learn. The principle on which the system is based is that it is what the child does for himself, not what is done for him, that really educates him, and therefore the teacher should not tell a pupil what he can guide him to discover for himself. An important advantage of this system is that knowledge so gained is much more likely to be retained than that acquired in any other way.

The object of examination questioning is to test acquired knowledge. By it the teacher ascertains how much the pupil retains of information previously given and whether assigned lessons have been properly prepared. Such questioning should be searching, so that a superficial may not pass for a thorough preparation, for which purpose stress should be laid on the more important points in the lesson rather than on those that are most obvious.

Fair, honest and searching questioning will influence to a very great extent the preparation of assigned lessons. When the pupils know that they will be thoroughly tested and will receive credit for their diligence they will have a strong motive for exertion; but if the test be imperfect or unsteady it holds out a chance of escape, and thus virtually encourages a low standard of preparation.

Such are the principal forms of questioning and their uses. The teacher has constant occasion, in almost every recitation, to use the three kinds in close conjunction with each other. Examination and instructive questioning particularly should be intimately connected. Thus when a pupil fails to answer a question, or does not answer it correctly, the question should not be passed to another member of the class as so frequently done, but in the first case, the teacher should go back a step or two and by judicious questioning lead the pupil to see the fact for himself, and in the second case the pupil should first be brought to see his mistake and then questioned so as to enable him to arrive at a correct conclusion.

The greatest pains should be taken in dealing with incorrect answers, as they show the pupils' deficiencies in, and misconceptions of the subject, or, in other words, they indicate clearly where he is weak, and should lead the teacher to make a proper diagnosis of the case, and apply the proper remedy.

How may the teacher attain proficiency in questioning? The most essential requisites are, I think 1st. Adequate knowledge of the subject under consideration, which knowledge should embrace not only what the text book contains on the subject, but such collateral matter as can be introduced for illustration and explanation. 2nd. A just appreciation of the capacity of the pupils. And 3rd. Experience as the result of practice.

I need scarcely say that not only extensive general scholarship, but also careful and thorough preparation of each day's work, is indispensably necessary to efficiency in conducting recitations. Neither aptitude, experience in teaching, nor knowledge of system can compensate for lack of preparation. The teacher should know the subject so as to be able to enter fully during recitation, such being the case he will be able to give his attention entirely to the class, and consequently conduct the exercise with much more vigor and animation; and what is also of much importance, he will impress the pupils with that sense of his competence and ability which is necessary to ensure their confidence and respect.

Besides benefitting the pupils, such a system will improve the teacher's own mind, and he will be encouraged, as from time to time he teaches the same subject, at finding that he is able to do it better than ever before, and that instead of being wearied with repetition, he becomes more and more enthusiastic on the subject.

The capacity of the class should be considered, so that the use of questions that are either too easy or too difficult may be avoided. The great design of proper questioning is to lead pupils to think clearly, therefore each question should require a distinct intellectual effort and each answer should be the thoughtful result of such effort. If the questions are too easy the mental effort

is unnecessary—the exercise ceases to be interesting, and consequently the pupils become careless, while questions that are so difficult that pupils cannot be reasonably expected to answer them lead either to guessing—a most injurious habit—or to the discouragement of the class, which should always be carefully avoided.

With regard to the third requisite, viz: Experience, I will merely remark that questioning is an art, and in this, as in all other arts, proficiency can be attained only by long-continued and careful practice. The teacher should studiously avoid any system which has been found defective, or is not calculated to act advantageously in the education of the pupil, and constantly aim at fitting out and using that system which will best promote the educational interests of the class.

I shall now offer some general observations on what I consider defective and what proper forms of questioning and answering. Questions should be clear, concise, definite and adapted to the capacity of the class. They should be uttered distinctly so as to be heard by every member of the class, and in order to necessitate close attention should not be repeated by the teacher. They should be correct in form, so that no change of phrasing will be necessary, as such change causes loss of time and tends to confuse the pupil. They should be in plain, simple language, intelligible to the comprehension of the most deficient in the class, and should at once direct the attention of the pupils to the specific point of which they are to speak. Indefinite or general questions, such as "Tell what you know about the Pacific Railway," or "sketch the reign of John," may do for written examinations, where the pupil is expected to say all he can on a given subject, but in oral examinations it saves time and prevents the introduction of much irrelevant matter to confine the pupils to definite answers by definite questions.

As a series of questions should be logical—should omit nothing—should develop every point in its proper place, and constantly lead to the ultimate fact to be brought out in the lesson. Ambiguous questions, or those that allow of a choice of answers, should not be used, as they encourage the habit of guessing. They should not suggest the answer either by the form of the question, tone of the voice, inflection, emphasis, or, as is sometimes done, by contrast, as, "Is the elephant a very small animal?" As a rule, questions should not admit of being answered by a simple "yes" or "no," but should generally require an answer in the form of a complete sentence. Mere assent or dissent does not require much intellectual effort; and questions that admit of such answers do not thoroughly test a pupil's knowledge, as he may know enough about the subject to enable him to answer correctly in this way, and still have very vague ideas regarding it. Another weighty objection to such answers is that they are useless as a means of cultivating language while the complete sentence form accustoms the pupil to correct and fluent expression and thoughtfulness—shows more clearly the amount of his knowledge, and thus leads to more pointed and suitable instruction—and if, as should always be the case, the teacher requires answers to be grammatically correct—forms one of the very best exercises in composition and grammar, for I firmly maintain that grammar can be far more practically and usefully taught by requiring pupils to speak correctly in the ordinary conversation of the school room and playground, than by a slavish adherence to text books, and the memorizing of an indefinite number of definitions and rules.

Unless in the case of definitions, answers should not be required in the words of the book, as by such a method the pupil may easily substitute memory for understanding in preparing and rehearsing his lessons.

Elliptical questioning may be used in the case of young pupils whose vocabulary is limited, but should not be used any longer than is necessary on that account. Simultaneous answering may be used to encourage the weak and timid, and give animation to a class when the interest begins to flag or in a hurried recapitulation, at the close of the different points taught in the lesson, but otherwise it should not be used, as it apt to destroy independence in the pupil by taking away his individuality. It is also a very strong temptation to indolence as the deficiencies of a pupil can only by such answering be made apparent to teacher and classmates.

Questions should be properly distributed so that no member may feel slighted or neglected, and the attention of careless pupils may be attracted by frequently calling upon them to answer. Answers should indicate thoughtfulness, and be given in such a manner as to admit of their being distinctly heard by every member of the class, if not so given, the answer should be repeated by the pupil—not by the teacher. The manner of dealing with incorrect answers, as already indicated, refers only to instructive questioning. In reviews, of course, the pupils should receive credit for correct answers only, but the mistakes should be noted and corrected at the close of the review.

In conducting a recitation, the teacher's manner should be lively, animated and encouraging. No pupil should be ridiculed on account of deficiencies, and judicious praise should be given when deserved. I am afraid that we, as teachers, are apt to use censure too lavishly and praise too sparingly. "Timothy Titcomb," in his Lessons in Life, very aptly says, "The desire for approbation is as legitimate as the desire for food. I do not suppose it should be much used as a motive for action, perhaps it should never be, but when a person, from a good motive, does a good action, he deserves the approval of the hearts that love him and he receives their

expressions of praise with or without pleasure. Nay, if these expressions of approval are withheld, as if from a certain sense of justice, it is felt that justice has not been done him, and that there is something due him that has not been paid. When a pupil takes pains to do well he feels himself paid for every endeavor by praise, and the most unsophisticated child knows when praise is justly due."

The last defective form I propose mentioning is "drawing out process" which consists in asking what the lawyers call leading questions.

It is so well described by Page, in his Theory and Practice of Teaching, that I cannot refrain from giving his words.

An arithmetic class is called up and the following dialogue takes place. Where do you begin? said the teacher, taking the book.

Pupil.—On the 93th page, 3rd question.

Teacher.—Read it, Charles.

Charles.—A man being asked how many sheep he had, said that he had them in two pastures; in one pasture he had eight; that three fourths of these were just one-third of what he had in the other. How many were there in the other?

Teacher.—Well, Charles, you must first get one-fourth of eight, must you not?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Well, one fourth of eight is two, isn't it?

Charles.—Yes sir, one fourth of eight is two.

Teacher.—Well then, three-fourths will be three times two, won't it?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Well, three times two are six, eh?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Very well. Now the book says that this six is just one-third of what he had in the other pasture, don't it?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Then if six is one third, three-thirds will be—three times six won't it?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Then he had eighteen sheep in the other pasture had he?

Charles.—Yes sir.

Teacher.—Next, take the next one.

At this point I interposed, and asked the teacher if he would request Charles to go through it alone. "Oh, yes," said the teacher, "Charles you may do it again." Charles read it again and looked up. "Well," said the teacher, "you must first get one fourth of eight mustn't you?" "Yes sir." And one fourth of eight is two, isn't it?" "Yes sir." And so the process went on as before till the final eighteen sheep were drawn out as before. The teacher looked around with an air which seemed to say, "Now I suppose you are satisfied." Shall I ask Charles to do it again? said I. The teacher assented. Charles again read the question and again—looked up. I waited and he waited—the teacher could not wait. "Why Charles," said he impatiently "you want one fourth of eight, don't you?" "Yes sir," said Charles promptly, and I thought best not to insist further at this time upon a repetition of yes sir, and the class were allowed to proceed in their own way.

Comment is unnecessary. Of course no teacher in West Huron adopts such a method but I fear something similar may still be heard in other districts.

Meteorological Report.

Report of the weather for the week ending October 18th, 1881.

Oct. 12th—Wind at 10 p. m. South, light, cloudy. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 594.

13th—Wind at 10 p. m. North, moderate gale, partly cloudy. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 685. One cubic inch of rain fell during the day.

14th—Wind at 10 p. m. East, fresh, raining, began to rain at 3 p. m. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 254.

15th—Wind at 10 p. m. North-west, partly clear, moderate gale. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 725. Ceased raining at 7:30 a. m., amount of rainfall 8 cubic inches.

16th—Wind at 10 p. m. North-east, light, cloudy. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 290. Amount of rainfall 0.7 cubic inches.

17th—Wind at 10 p. m. North-west, light air, cloudy. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 296. Heavy squall at 3:20 p. m. until 4:30 p. m., wind travelled from 30 to 35 miles per hour. Amount of rainfall 5 cubic inches. Thunder and lightning.

18th—Wind at 10 p. m. North-west, fresh, cloudy, been showery all day. Number of miles wind travelled in 24 hours 535.

G. N. MACDONALD, Observer. Goderich, Oct. 19th, 1881.

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