

THE P.U.S. METHOD OF NARRATION AND ITS PURPOSE.

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I WELCOME the opportunity this morning, as I also recognise the honour, of considering with you this very important aspect of our work, the P.U.S. method of narration and its purpose. May I reverse the order and speak of its purpose first?

Mr. George Sampson, writing in the daily press some little time ago, in the course of a very thought provoking article on mental indigestion, said that "nothing that we learn is of the least value to us until it becomes part of us. Our mechanical memories may be hung about with immense stocks of matter and we ourselves be the better for none of it." Now narration is the act of making what we read, part of us. Narration is the evidence of a conscious act, the evidence of a conscious mental effort. It is evidence of mental digestion. Physiologically we know, some of us to our cost, that if we are to get any nourishment from the food we take, that food must be thoroughly digested. And in the mental life we must agree that, if one, as Mr. Sampson suggests, is to get any mental nourishment from what one reads or learns, then what one reads or learns must be "mentally digested."

The teacher's business, I take it, is the education of the child committed to his care, to see that what the child learns becomes part of the child, to see that information becomes knowledge. To this task the teacher has brought much thought, much care and much energy. His oral lessons have been models of what such lessons should be, carefully prepared, carefully planned and cleverly delivered. Education is still subject to many tyrannies, but to none greater than that of the oral lesson—the oral lesson with its preparation, its presentation, its application, its recapitulation and its blackboard notes all complete—the oral lesson with every conceivable prop and stay designed to relieve the child of any mental effort,

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the oral lesson where the teacher is the active partner and the child the passive, often literally so, the sleeping partner in the business of education. We know that a child can indeed follow a series of questions and can with some confidence suggest a series of answers. But don't you think the real mental effort, the visualising of the whole, has been that of the teacher? The child undoubtedly arrives at a point at which the teacher wishes him to arrive, but he has not exercised his "mental muscles" in getting there. He has had a lift by the way. "The civilized man," says Emerson, "has built a coach but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches but lacks so much support of muscle." And the child having arrived at the desired point, in a coach so to speak, and by virtue of much labour on the part of the teacher, unconsciously registers his disapproval of the method by promptly forgetting all about it. That which was to have nourished his mind has not been digested, the learning has not become part of himself. No, I think we must agree with Mr. Sampson when he suggests that we are only slowly realizing the fact that the only person who can really educate the child is the child himself. "What of the teacher?" you say. The teacher, in his right relation to the child, is a guide, a philosopher and, I hope, a friend, not a source of much second-hand information which must be pumped into the mind of the child willy-nilly. That way lies cramming and, as has been said, cramming is injudicious feeding. "They cram and do not know," says Ruskin. "They narrate and do know," suggests Miss Mason. Let us put the child in the place where he can get

knowledge and narration will ensure that he assimilates it. "The place where we go to get knowledge," says Carlyle, "is the books themselves. It depends on what we read, after all manner of professors have done their best for us. The true university of these days is a collection of books."

This, then, is the purpose of narration—a purpose which we would do well to keep constantly before us. There should be no misconception. It is not a teacher's device designed to find out if the child has completed a given task. It is not an act of verbal memory. It is a process which makes all the difference between a child knowing a thing and not knowing it. Narration is, indeed, like faith, the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It is the method whereby the child assimilates what he reads.

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So much, briefly, for the purpose of narration. May I turn as briefly to the practical application of the principle? I do not think I can offer any "rules of narration." I would not if I could. I can only give you a few thoughts that have occurred to me from time to time. First of all I have come to the conclusion that narration—shall I say successful narration—involves a larger question, that question which is somewhat loosely spoken of in these days as the freedom of the child. Edmond Holmes tells us that "any adult who exacts from the child blind faith and literal obedience, and having secured these proceeds to tell the child in the fullest detail what he is to do, to say, to think (or pretend to think), to feel (or pretend to feel), is devitalizing his whole personality. Unless the child himself, his soul, his self, his ego, call it what you please, is behind his own actions, they are not really his." I believe with Miss Mason that narration is an art inherent in the child. I am sure that a child likes to narrate because he feels that here at least is something of his own, because he feels he is behind it himself. It is a natural act, but like all other natural acts, it atrophies, and atrophies quickly, in an unnatural atmosphere. I believe that if the teacher dominates the child, narration will suffer. So will the child. And I believe—to use the words of Holmes again, that if every action of the child in school is merely the outcome of a command from autocratic authority, if the instincts of the child are repressed by the will of another, narration will not be, cannot be, the delightful spontaneous art it should be. I feel a great temptation to digress on this point, but must content myself with just a passing reference to the mental atmospheric conditions of the classroom. At least there must be no depressions centred round Iceland—Iceland as represented by the teacher's desk.

Having got the right atmosphere, there are perhaps two dangers against which we must guard in narration. The first is a relic of the past. When we see a child groping his way along, struggling with the eternal question, "What comes next?" we feel we must help in some manner. We feel we must interpolate a question, we feel we must tell him—once again we are tempted to do the work ourselves. Perhaps there may be occasions when a word in season might be of help, as in the case when a child has come across an unfamiliar name, but in the main I think we ought not to interfere in the child's narration. A discussion afterwards will possibly clear up any

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difficulties. This is the place for the "oral" work. The second danger I see comes when we are over anxious. Knowing the value of narration we become very anxious that the child shall narrate well, and it has occurred to me that in some subtle way this anxiety is communicated to the child. I may be wrong. But I do feel that an anxious teacher makes an anxious and disturbed

child, and an anxious and disturbed child is not himself, is not behind his own actions. I said we were not to help the child, but perhaps there are one or two ways we might do so. This is one. Let us help by keeping pure and unspotted our faith in the child's ability to perform a natural act.

Again, in the practical application of the principles of narration care should be taken to distinguish between what has been termed verbal memory and mind memory. On occasions I have been told that we are teaching tricks of memory. My invariable reply is to read a fairly lengthy passage which is impossible of memorisation at one reading, and ask a child to narrate. The critic is bound to admit that this is not verbal memory, not the weary conning of details divorced from their context, the learning of things by rote. The learning, parrot fashion, of notes taken down at the teacher's dictation or while the oral lesson is in progress, or even the learning of our beloved blackboard summaries—this is verbal memory, a time-honoured method which I believe is still in existence. Narration ensures a vision of the whole in orderly sequence—and it is this comprehension which is knowledge. I grant that the child remembers striking passages and phrases and uses them on occasion, but why should he not? How many exercises have been devised to follow the reading of literary excerpts, exercises of the type, "Put the following words and phrases into complete sentences?"—exercises designed with the express purpose of teaching the child to use an author's words and phrases. Inconsistently enough, because a child has used, and used, mark you, after one reading, not as a result of a series of uninteresting exercises, a striking phrase which has occurred in his reading, we are accused of teaching tricks of memory. I am often asked in this connection how much should be read to a child, or how much should he read himself, before narrating. A number of considerations qualify an answer—there is the capacity of the child, there is the age of the child, there is the degree of difficulty of the book, but in the main I think sufficient should be read to make it impossible for the

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child to remember it verbally. Further, I think that the portion read should as far as possible be an entity in itself, I mean should contain one central fact, should form one or more mental pictures of varying length according to the type of book. And here is a task for the teacher. I am certain of the efficacy of previous preparation on the part of the teacher. It is so fatally easy to pick up a book, turn to the required page and read without any knowledge of what is coming or how far one is going before calling for narration. No, I am sure that careful preparation is as great a factor in the success of narration as it is in any department of our work.

I suspect, too, that if the teacher enjoys the imagery and language of the book there is some subtle effect on the consequent narration. Virtue has gone out of him. I do not know whether I am right or no, but I do think the evident enjoyment of the teacher in the reading helps to a similar feeling in the child and a consequent ease of narration. I am certain, however, that a child will not enjoy a reading because he is told he ought to. Further, and here is another way in which I believe a teacher can help—I think that the quality of the teacher's reading has its effect, a reading, not monotonous on the one hand, and certainly not too emphasised on the other, but a clearly articulated reading that enables the power of the words themselves to reach the child.

As the child progresses through the school, he undertakes more and more of the reading himself. And rightly so, for if education is a preparation for the future, and if it is to be a

continuous process, the child will eventually be obliged to rely on his own reading. As in the case when the teacher read to him, if he wishes to assimilate what he has read himself, he must narrate it. As, however, conditions in schools are so diverse, so the actual method adopted will be different in various schools. But whether it be narration to a group leader, or to a special chum in one corner, whether it be narration to the teacher or to the class, or whether it be written narration or silent narration, it must be practised, and I have no doubt each teacher will work out his own method and the one or many that are applicable to his special conditions.

There is, however, one method which I think might with advantage be practised a little more with older students. I refer to silent narration. Oral narration will always be with us [p 474]

and it is good to hear children express themselves with fluency and without self-consciousness. But later in life the child will be left to his own reading and from the nature of things he will not always have the opportunity, or even the desire, to narrate orally. Hence if he has on occasion been practised in silent narration it will be much to his benefit. The great difficulty of course is to make sure that the child is “going over” his reading thoughtfully, carefully, and of set purpose. Indeed, I am sometimes asked, “How do you make sure that your children are narrating when in groups for instance?” or, “What would you do with a child who won’t work?” Here, again, is the teacher’s task. Here, again, the teacher must be guide, often a philosopher, and always the friend. Every teacher knows the child who, for reasons known or unknown, has what W.W. Jacobs—I think it is W.W. Jacobs—calls a general disinclination for work. My opinion is that under wise and sympathetic direction the great majority of children will work honestly. I believe that children have great potentialities for good, and it is the teacher’s task to use those potentialities. Given the right spirit—and teaching *does* require the right spirit—the child feels a joy—who does not?—in the acquisition of knowledge. *Of course, we must* be sure that the child is working to the best of his ability, but I believe that patience and tact will succeed where compulsion will not. We cannot allow any shirking of difficulties, we should not be faithful to our duty if we did—and no experienced teacher is deceived for long. If a child does not narrate, it is worth while to try to find out the reason. A medical practitioner, having diagnosed a broken limb, does not thereupon treat the patient for scarlet fever. Having found the reason why the child does not narrate we can then apply a suitable remedy. The teacher’s task is a difficult one in this matter. A visitor, leaving school some little time ago, said, “This is very nice, the children seem to be working, they get their books, they narrate and, having finished, they get another book and repeat the process. But what do *you* do?” That is the question—what of the teacher? To ensure honest effort, to ensure good narration and therefore assimilation of what is read requires “ceaseless though quite unobtrusive” activity on the part of the teacher. It calls into play, as Holmes says, “tact and patience, imagination and resourcefulness, sympathy and intelligence.” It is far easier to force children to be passive

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recipients of certain predigested scraps of information, it is a much more difficult matter to allow the child to be active in the matter and to get him to do his best. It requires a great faith and trust—the harder the case the greater the faith and trust. And the hardest case is always Johnny so-and-so in our own class.

¹ This School works from the P.U.S. programmes for Forms I.-III.