THE MIND AT WORK

I. NARRATION AND DISCUSSION

By E. CHOLMONDELEY.

Do your readers share the present educational belief in the value of discussion? How widespread it is.

'Did you get a good discussion after your lecture?'—'How much time do you allow for discussion on your time-table?'—'I can't get it clear. I have no one to discuss it with.'—'It went splendidly; the audience brought up point after point for discussion at question-time.'—'You ought to remember. We discussed it thoroughly at the time.'

The belief seems to be that if a matter has been discussed it has been understood. People are seeking to rouse intellectual effort, to make the individual mind active. Discussion trains the individual to use his mind, to order thought and speech, to exchange notions with other people, to hold opinions. Do you think this belief is a true one?

The mind at work has a threefold activity. It attends; it reflects; it uses what has been apprehended. This threefold activity receives unequal consideration. Much has been said and written upon the power of attention, how to secure it, to sustain it. Every teacher knows the value of an attentive mind. Much, too, has been written and spoken about the value of expression when the mind has apprehended truth, or beauty, or goodness. The value of brush or pen, of decisive action, of criticism, and (in these days) of discussion is pointed out.

Between attention and expression lies a whole world of thought, when the mind is active in reflection, seeking knowledge in close contact, resting upon its object, in the same intense activity as a bee on its honey-flower. So little is understood about the way in which the mind lives. It lives by knowing, by active delight in the ideas, forms, thoughts with which it comes into touch. The mind must dwell upon its findings, to accept or to reject. Only so can knowledge come, knowledge of the thoughts, truths, beauties, facts which it is a man's individual concern to know and to show forth and to use in daily life.

'Reflective thinking'? There is close contact between a tree and its reflection, between light and the surface which throws back the beam. So, too, there is the impact of an idea upon the mind in closest touch. There the word ceases to be significant. A reflection is passive; there is no word to convey the active stillness with which an idea is received and absorbed. C. M. Mason uses the analogy of food and the body in order to describe the hidden process. She says that the mind 'feeds' upon the ideas which it accepts and that the whole person is enlivened by the strength of such food. While this work goes on, the mind seeks for words or images which fit its findings, and, as these come, it forms an individual notion. The person begins to 'know.' Then comes the moment when he can use what he knows, can express it, discuss it.

Attention, reflective thinking, expression. If the mind be active, so it works, not in stages or in steps, but in threefold activity. But the burden of our century has produced passive, inactive minds by the thou-

sand. How are men and women to be helped to escape from the distress and muddle that idle minds produce in personal living?

Thought must be stirred. Popular opinion says, 'Stir thought by discussion. Put the subject clearly before the audience, evoke questions, inspire someone to answer, others to bring experience to bear, until every mind is alert and active. Each person will remember the discussion and will go on turning the question over in his mind, seeking to know more, to find out more. … Insist upon a *really good discussion*.' Is popular opinion right? The answer comes from the intelligent man in the street. 'It's no good discussing it with So-and-so; he knows nothing about it.'—'I wish I had known more about it; the discussion was very active but I knew too little to join in.'—'She is in a muddle about electricity. She did not understand the lecture and the discussion confused her more than ever.'

But he also says: 'There was a point about which I was not clear; the discussion put it right.' And: 'I do hope there will be time for questions. I have always wanted to discuss that point with someone who really knows.'

The intelligent man in the street acts upon the experience that some clear understanding of a matter must be present before discussion can be valuable. There must first be a degree of knowledge. This granted, the mind can be stirred to fuller and clearer knowledge by discussion and questions. The value of a discussion depends upon what has gone before, upon the degree of attention, the quality of reflection, already given. A first lesson, an introductory lecture, a first reading of a poem, a glimpse of a work of art, do not call for immediate discussion. They must 'sink in,' we say, before we can talk about them. A true word. It must never be forgotten that, before the mind can be stirred to action in discussion, it must have been actively at rest in reflection. First give leisure to think, then give opportunity to express thought and to compare what has been found in the process. Only a superficial activity can result when the mind has not had leisure to reflect, to let a thing 'sink in.' Lively discussions and much quick talk are often merely the exchange of superficial impressions after scanty attention and less thought.

How can children be given the opportunity for this 'sinking in,' how can they be trained to attend, to reflect and to express their thoughts? C. M. Mason replies: Let the children tell back what they read, hear, see, and let this action of the mind be habitual. The small ones shall go over, in their minds, their pictures, their tales, their geography and other readings. As they do so, they use their own words, they 'tell back' aloud, giving each incident, each point, in their own way. If there are several children, they take turns, until the whole is told back. Older boys and girls must be given the same leisure for reflective thinking. They, too, must go over thoroughly, point by point, the chapter, work or art, or lecture. But they are already practised in the habit and are able to order their thoughts, to give proportion and trend to an argument, to select or to reject details. This work can be silent or it can be worded in writing or out loud. Words come spontaneously in the glow of delight which lingers from the first impact of truth or beauty. They come slowly and with effort if an argument has been subtle, a chain of facts intricate, or where thought is abstract. Word finding accompanies thinking whether the words are spoken or written. It is all part of

reflective thought, leading to knowledge. Small children carry their knowledge home to use it, freely and with zest, in play, in paint, in act. Older people weave it into conversation, into art or action, carrying knowledge forward to new activity of thought and discovery. They have come to the right moment for discussion. They know something, can go forward to meet other minds,

to discover new aspects of the subject, to enquire, to experiment.

The time comes when the simple 'telling over' of childhood is not enough. It will always be a necessary part of thought, but a person of nine or ten can show the beginning of further and different thought. The power of going one step further can be called upon by a wise question: 'Why do you think the English burned Joan of Arc?' and one of the children said, 'Because they were afraid.' It was a thought provoking question; no more is needed. When the upper forms are reached the something more, the step forward, gains in importance. Too few people discover how to assemble what they know, how to bring one thing to bear upon another, how to enquire, how to criticise, how to hold an opinion. Many people are helped to such power by well-conducted discussion. A cry goes up, 'But there is no time.' Remember the many books to read, the ground to cover, the varied school activities, the number of subjects in the curriculum. 'There is no time.' One of the claims put forward on behalf of her method by C. M. Mason is that, if it is followed, *there is time*—time to think, to make and to do, true leisure for hobbies and for outdoor life as well as for social occasions. Complete attention and the habit of narration give this time.

'They take up every available minute,' says the puzzled teacher. 'There is only time for discussion if we leave out narration. May I leave out narration in the upper forms?' Again the answer must be found by asking, 'How does mind live?' It lives by knowing, and knowledge comes by reflective thinking, by letting things sink in, by quietly ruminating. It must be remembered that thought is a timeless action. To see with the mind's eye, going over a matter point by point, delighting in it, grasping it, does not take time but leisure. To a person trained in the habit of narration, a calm, unhurried five minutes is leisure. Five minutes, pencil in hand with which to jot down a word here or there, is all that is needed in order to follow through a train of thought or a series of incidents before discussion. If a class reads silently, quick readers will have more leisure than slower ones, but a slow reader is often a clear thinker, so the loss is a gain. Thinking takes leisure and little time, discussion takes time, much time; so does every activity by which the human spirit chooses to express thought. 'Leisure for thinking, time for expression of thought,' is an unalterable law of necessity.

How to vary the form which narration takes, how to use discussion rightly, when to leave a great passage of literature or a moving work of art to sink in unnarrated, undiscussed, how to keep a large class of children all at work in narration—these are all part of a teacher's experience, tact and wisdom.