

SOME THOUGHTS ON NARRATION

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‘Narration? Oh yes, that’s what they do in P.N.E.U. schools, isn’t it? The children just read a bit and then narrate and the teacher does nothing much except listen. Lessons don’t have to be really prepared, because everything is there in the books the children read from’.

There are still people who think this is the whole truth even if they have been to see a P.N.E.U. school and have listened to lessons there. Sometimes it may seem that there is little else to it even though the visitor owns with surprise that the narration by the children was really remarkable, and yet the lesson was read only once.

Can P.N.E.U. teaching in school be quite as simple as that?

Almost all children have the deep-rooted desire to tell others about things they have seen or heard—there are rare exceptions—and they all have lively visual imagination, so that what they tell is really what they ‘saw’ when they read it or heard it. As we grow older, we find that we tend to think over in detail things which make an impression on us, and, when older still, we make ourselves summarise mentally what we particularly want to remember accurately or those arguments we wish to use.

I think it is true to say that narration as practised in P.N.E.U. schools is founded on this power of mind to recall knowledge gained from a single reading or seeing or doing and the fact that such recollection makes so deep an impression on the mind that it remains for a long time and is never entirely lost.

Narration, however, is of many kinds, though always the answer to the question (put mentally): ‘What comes next?’ Obviously it requires some power of concentration from the first. Very young children, in the nursery class, are not expected to narrate, but often they insist on doing so because of this instinct to ‘tell all about it’ to somebody. How many of us can refrain from telling that good story we heard yesterday? And anything that must be remembered, do we not repeat it—even if it is only ‘First turning to the left and third to the right’? Narration is extraordinarily satisfying to the narrator, though, alas, a little boring sometimes for the listener since he is getting it at secondhand. And second-hand knowledge is ... but that is another story.

So the youngest children begin, *con amore*, to tell Mummie or baby sister all about it. At about six years old, narration in the school is expected. The stories are such that hardly a child can bear to wait his turn and no tiny detail may be left out. This is, of course, the result of ‘involuntary’ attention and for some two years little conscious effort to attend needs to be fostered because the child’s power of attention is growing all the time and becoming habitual. But is narration, even at this age, always merely ‘telling back’? It must be, we know, the child’s answer to ‘What comes next?’ It can be acted, with good speaking parts and plenty of criticism from actors and onlookers; nothing may be added or left out. Map drawing can be an excellent narration, or, may-be, clay modelling will supply the means to answer that question, or paper and poster paints, or chinks, even a paper model with scissors and paste pot. Always, however, there should be talk as well, the answer expressed in words; that is, the picture painted, the clay model, etc., will be des-

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cribed and fully described, because, with few exceptions, only words are really satisfying.

When children reach the middle school other types of narration may be used; they can offer headings to cover the lesson and then narrate by filling in the details under each heading or the class may be divided into small groups with a leader in each one and narrate part of or all the lesson. The responsible teacher should be keenly aware of everything that is going on. Shy children will often narrate in a group or a specially 'mute' child may be given his chance alone with the mistress or a friendly class-mate. There are children—and grown-ups too—who do not willingly talk; often they will narrate well on paper.

At about this stage a lesson should often end with some serious discussion arising from questions asked by the children or by the teacher. One has to be careful not to allow opinions to be formed on too little knowledge; it is an opportunity to show children how dangerous such carelessly formed opinions can be. This teaching develops as the children move up through the school.

Narration, however, is not without its hazards: for example, a keen teacher, in order to 'improve' the lesson, may allow herself to talk, to add in the middle of it all some interesting item from her own experience; or she may not have prepared the lesson quite carefully enough—for narration lessons need very thorough preparation—so that she does not notice till too late that there are names and unfamiliar long words which will bother the class. The lesson is therefore stopped for a minute or two while the difficult words are written clearly on the board and a few words of explanation given. Such interruptions do no less than ruin the very best lesson, the thread of interest and intense concentration has been broken and the class will have great difficulty in picking it up again and keeping to it. Even then, the lesson is broken-backed. So, all names should be on the board directly the introductory question on the previous lesson has been dealt with, and the children should say them over until their tongues find them easy and familiar. As to the interesting extras that the teacher can add, they may either come at the beginning, to arouse interest or curiosity or, generally better, at the end in those few minutes so jealously saved for questions, remarks, etc., which round off the perfect lesson.

By the time children reach the top of the school narration has become an ingrained habit, has led to observation and thought, to an ability to relate what was learnt last term—last week—yesterday—with 'this' that we are now considering. Such co-ordination grows from remembered past narrations over a wide field. Some note in to-day's reading awakes an echo in some other subject or lesson and so the power to compare and contrast and illustrate by example is developed. This should lead to a valuable use of analogy, and application of past history to modern times and modern problems.

There are two more forms of narration which can be practised here: in one, the pupils set questions to the class in such a way as to cover the whole of the lesson. This can be very interesting as there is much art in the setting of a good question. The other form is silent narration. This everyone should master, if only for its usefulness in after school life when one wants to do some serious reading at home or in the course

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of some form of higher education. Narration in silence needs great concentration, but once mastered it gives the possessor the power of carrying on his education for the rest of his life.