

## Some Notes on Narration.

By G. F. HUSBAND.

### NARRATION MORE PROVOCATIVE OF THOUGHT THAN ORAL QUESTIONING.

"The art of questioning is the whole art of teaching" said one of His Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, "and if you persist with Narration methods your teachers will lose the ability to question. You must question to make the children think."

Training the children to think is the slogan of the elementary school, and teachers pride themselves on their ability to do it by oral questioning. Questioning is the *sine qua non* of every good lesson. "It wasn't a *lesson*: it was a *lecture*" is the most damning criticism that can be offered to the Student Teacher.

It would appear that the only time children think is in an elementary school during an oral lesson. What stimulates thought in the upper forms of secondary schools, in the universities, or in the minds of the great thinkers who have never been subject to this oral questioning?

Now I frequently find that many who talk glibly about training children to think have very nebulous notions of what thinking is, and when I ask "What is thinking?" I get vague answers that usually amount to "Well, er-er-thinking is thinking." The best answer I have received is "Following a chain of reasoning or tracing cause to effect or effect to cause." We are not discussing Psychology so I accept the answer in order to point out that in the majority [p 611]

of cases the particular chain of reasoning or the particular sequence of facts linking cause and effect *has been read by the teacher in a book*. If not, he is one of those original minds who should be writing a book.

Teachers pulse with joy when they find a nice sequence of facts for their scholars to negotiate. I recently witnessed a particularly vigorous display of rapid questioning. Each scholar was on tenterhooks, alert for the moment when the volley of questions might be directed at him. The questioner enjoyed himself and felt his power. With a glance in my direction—the glance was a challenge to narration—he said: "That's stirred them up a bit: that's made them think!"

But *had* it made them think? It is quite easy, after a little practice, to question children along a line of thought or through a chain of reasoning and to get them to utter thoughts in expressly the phrases required: *but the real thinking is done by the questioner*. The questions that are of value are informative, they focus attention on a succession of details one by one. When the questions are recapitulatory they are merely mental jabs.

If the answer pre-determined by the teacher is not forthcoming the *pupil* is declared to be dull!

We of the P.U.S. say: Let the child himself do that which the teacher usually does for him. Let the child by narration supply both question and answer.

During the war I passed through several army schools. After dominating a class for many years, I suddenly found myself dominated in a class and I have very vivid recollections of one instructor. He was extremely fond of questioning (dare I add that in civil life he was an

elementary school teacher?) Many of his questions were very bewildering and when answers did not come readily he waxed sarcastic about our mental attainments. Sometimes the diatribe was delivered with an air of cold, calm, despair: frequently, with rising choler. He generally concluded:

“... and now you can’t answer *that*? Why! it’s as plain as a pikestaff!”

*Of course the answer was as plain as a pikestaff to him, because he had read it the night before in his book.*

We were very uncomfortable for the first few days of  
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the course of instruction, but learned eventually to shut our minds to the expostulations and await his answer to the question.

Teachers become so inured to this practice of goading their pupils’ thoughts along prescribed channels, that information not given within the limits they choose to place seems illogical and discursive. That is why a visit to a school where Narration methods are in vogue sometimes gives the impression that the children have merely acquired a glib tongue and a trick of rapid memorising—a charge frequently levelled at P.U.S. methods.

That this charge is quite wrong will be evident to any who read the end of this article or the examination questions set from term to term.

Tasks set in written narration demand *sustained effort from each pupil* and also compel the teacher to get at the back of the mind of all the scholars. Oral questions must be of a lighter type and only the answers of one or two can be dealt with.

#### ORAL TEACHING IN THE P.U. SCHOOL.

Oral teaching is not, however, *entirely* taboo in the P.U. School. In the disciplinary subjects such as Mathematics and Grammar it is necessary. It is necessary too, to stimulate and to direct effort, and to gather parts into a whole. There is no rigid rule in the matter. One must use a little discretion, provided the general principles are adhered to. In the teaching of Mathematics skilful questions are essential. As already stated these are informative and divert attention from details that are clouding the issue. The best of teachers, however, frequently waste time on unnecessary questioning even in mathematics. How often is the introduction of a new rule in Arithmetic accompanied by an elaborate series of deductive questions! and this to a class the majority of which are quite capable of seizing the essentials from a single practical demonstration. The less the teacher talks the more the class will have to think.

#### HOW TO BEGIN NARRATION.

The true measure of the value of Narration can only be gleaned by a teacher who persists with his own pupils; and

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as the children’s powers develop, so will the teacher’s pedagogical and psychological insight develop. The teacher must restrain himself when “breaking-in” a class. It will be weeks, perhaps months, before the majority are fluent. Impatience must never be shewn when the children mumble a few words instead of giving a brilliant narration, and they must never be prompted

or interrupted. The following notes may be suggested to beginners. There are many ways of conducting Narration. Every good teacher will have his own.

While the class is reading, sit on a chair placed as far as possible from the front desks. Call to your side, one by one, the shy or backward members of the class and encourage them to tell you quietly how far they have read and what it is about. At the close of the lesson let the forward members narrate to the class. Interrupt the narration at a suitable point to allow one of the backward boys to finish. You will have decided from the private narrating, to which boys you will give these finishing tasks. The amount of public narration set to the backward boys is judiciously increased until they are able to initiate a narration for others to finish. This goes on until the whole class are more or less fluent. Great care must be taken that narration does not fall to one or two bright pupils only.

An interesting help at this stage is to divide a class into two teams. Each member of one team asks a question of the corresponding member of the opposing team and vice-versa. A correct answer scores a point for the team. If a boy asks a question that he himself cannot answer, his team loses two points. Questions are usually confined to the matter contained in the pages of the book that the children have just been reading. All children enjoy this exercise. Keen discussion often arises over an answer, and when permission is given there is eager reference to the book.

#### CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR NARRATION.

When a fair measure of fluency has been attained the class should be grouped for narration. A class of forty will provide eight or ten groups. Select your group leaders. They are known as "Number One." Let each leader in rotation select "Number Two," and so on until the [p 614]

groups are complete. This method of selection avoids friction and secures an equable distribution of ability, for the children are shrewd judges of capability. Groups are re-arranged weekly, monthly, or as occasion demands. Suppose the teacher has just read to the class. He may say "Threes narrate." The various groups close together and "Number Three" of each group narrates to the remainder of his group in a voice audible only to his own group. The teacher either passes from group to group or takes up a point of vantage from which he can scan the faces (particularly the narrators') of the various groups. When the narrations are complete, he may say "Fives criticise." Afterwards he may say: "Has any one heard a good narration?" This narration may be repeated to the whole class. Boys in other groups may be called upon to criticise and to say in which way that particular narration was superior or inferior to that which they heard in their own group. (I have grouped over 90 boys in this way to hear Plutarch read. There was never sufficient time to hear all the criticisms, which were invariably continued with much animation in the playground, or on the way home).

Most elementary schools are furnished with dual desks. Children sitting at the right end of the desk may be told to narrate to those sitting at the left, and vice versa. An observant teacher will readily see where the narration moves and where it halts: he will know from previous experience in which part of the class room his presence is most needed. When children have reached this stage of narration they are usually so interested in their work and so keen to narrate that it is rare to find any tendency to waste time.

## THE SPECIAL VALUE OF NARRATION.

The value of narration does not lie wholly in the swift acquisition of knowledge and its sure retention. Properly dealt with, it produces a mental transfiguration. *It provides much more exercise for the mind than is possible under other circumstances* and there is a corresponding degree of alertness and acquisitiveness. As a Yorkshireman would put it the children become very “quick in t’ up-tak” (quick in the up-take). Psychologically, narration crystallises a number of impressions. It also tends to complete a chain

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of experiences. The expression itself goes back to the child in the form of a still further impression—the impression of what he has said, and he is able to gauge the success of his efforts. This completes the cycle of his activities and without narration in some form or other there is a sense of incompleteness. *It is a fact worthy of very careful note that children trained in these methods pick up immediately the threads of their work after quite long absences from school.*

## HOW NARRATION MAY BE VARIED.

Narration may take the form of an impromptu dramatic performance. There are several opportunities for this every term. I give three, at random, of the many scores of instances I have dealt with.

A class of very young boys had been reading of the incident between Bruce and De Bohun at Bannockburn. They were told that some boys were to be chosen to act it. A short time was allowed for each scholar to think out how it should be done, but no conversation was allowed. Then De Bohun and Bruce were chosen from a host of eager volunteers. They selected, one a “horse,” the other a “palfrey.” The lance was a short map pole; the battle axe, a rolled up newspaper. There were some very candid criticisms of the performance. The whole affair did not take five minutes, but there had been a sure sifting of facts in the mind of every boy.

A senior class had listened to a reading of that portion of Plutarch’s “Life of Aristides” dealing with the quarrel between the Athenians and the Spartans respecting the honour of victory over the Persians. The whole class resolved itself into a Council. A heated impromptu dialogue was carried on between Leocrates and Myronides, Aristides intervened, and then Theogiton, Cleocritus, Aristides, Pausanias addressed the council. Finally resolutions were passed respecting the cost and form of the memorial.

The same class produced a highly creditable performance from Chap. xxxiii of Marshall’s “English Literature for Boys and Girls.” The chapter deals with a Townley play “How the Shepherds watched their flocks.” The boys were given a few days to prepare this in their leisure time.

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## WRITTEN NARRATION.

Written narration becomes more frequent as the children grow older, but oral narration

is never entirely supplemented. When a fair measure of fluency has been obtained by the class, criticism should be directed towards delivery, terseness, etc. Even after years of practice oral narration will afford opportunities for mental striving.

When written tasks are being selected, it is of paramount importance that the teacher keep prominently before him the psychological processes involved. The usual complaint at first is that the children's answers wander from the point. This rights itself in time. Discursive answers should be contrasted with the more succinct and also freely discussed by the class. The amount of matter written is no measure of the mental processes involved. Teachers can save themselves much labour in marking exercises if they bear this in mind. The victory procession in Aristides, for instance, can be accounted for by a list of words naming the several persons and things in sequence. A rough sketch would do the same. In each case the boy has had to "turn-over" in his mind all details of the paragraphs read. Another useful exercise is to ask the children to write down six or more questions on the subject matter dealt with, the questions not to require simply "Yes" or "No" as answer. The class collectively will produce a very wide range of questions, but of course many will be redundant. Occasionally [sic] the children should be called upon to answer each other's questions. As boys are usually hyper-critical of the answers to their questions, some useful discussions arise. In Geography, sketch maps by the scholars of the bird's-eye-view type are interesting and useful. Here too a boy has to sift very carefully what he has read, before expressing himself on paper.

Attention and reflection go hand in hand. Tasks are set to the children to make them condense, classify, generalise, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour with their minds in one way or another and when the teacher sets the task *he should know precisely what labour he is setting his scholars' minds to do*. This labour should be as varied as possible. Physical Exercises are not all arm exercises or all breathing exercises, or all leg exercises. The answers [p 617]

to all tasks need careful scrutiny and the reason for every mis-apprehension should be traced.

(This paper has been written taking for granted the books used in the Parents' Union School. There is a much advocated system of narration which makes narration an effort of memory *after* much previous exercise—word drill, explanations, self-expression work, etc. The Readers used for this contain interesting extracts only. P.U.S. narration takes place *after one reading* and without explanations and the condition is that the *books* used must be *living books* of literary value: this method of narration is mind work, and not memory work. It must always be remembered that P.U.S. narration is not a mere 'device.' It rests upon philosophical principles and these must be studied lest it become a mere shibboleth.—Ed.)