

## THE VALUE OF HANDICRAFTS IN EDUCATION.

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“Men are born creators. Pride of craftsmanship is one of the glories of our human nature.”

THIS quotation from the Bishop of Winchester's anniversary sermon to University College, London (*Parents' Review*, July, 1926), gives the reason why children should learn handicrafts. “Education is the science of relations,” and among other relationships necessary to humanity is this one which relates the child to nature by teaching him the use of tools and giving him experience of such materials as clay, cane, paper, cardboard, wood, leather, metals. In a less highly civilised society than ours, the growing child would learn handcraft naturally by taking his part in the family occupations. To quote Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*:

“When young and old in circle  
    Around the firebrands close;  
When the girls are weaving baskets,  
    And the lads are shaping bows;  
When the good man mends his armour,  
    And trims his helmet plume;  
When the good wife's shuttle merrily  
    Goes flashing through the loom. ...”

The modern town-dweller has to do none of these things. He may possibly watch the itinerant chair-seater using cane or rush, or may, when in Cornwall, see the fishermen making their lobster pots or wandering inland up the combes to gather long red willow stems for the purpose; the magic of the potter's wheel in an exhibition or the sound and sparks from the blacksmith's forge will invariably attract him; if the chance comes, he will linger among the joiners, plumbers and plasterers fitting up a house for occupation. But his needs are chiefly supplied from shops and he is hardly aware that everything he uses has been made for him by someone who fed a machine, or

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by a craftsman who had the joy of designing and perfecting an object of his own imagination: designed to fit the use for which it was intended, perfected by the help of all the worker's previous failures and successes, fashioned with tools some of which were wrought by himself to carry out his special purpose. Intention and design are the source of pleasure in work, and children have a right to this sort of happiness. It is a part of their inheritance as human beings and they ought not to be deprived of it. But since it is no longer furnished by their daily life, handcraft has to be taught. Scouts and Guides and campers gain some of these joys of the simple life. Kipling has a delightful story of a boy scout who had a natural taste for cooking. The delicate manipulations required in the culinary art: making pastry, chopping parsley, breaking an egg, tossing a pancake, for example, are extremely good training for the hand and eye.

Habits of order, neatness, definite work in a given time, perfect execution, economy and cleanliness are all called for in cooking properly. These being habits which should be fostered in childhood (as "Home Education" teaches us) must always be quietly cultivated by the handicraft teacher. And yet the cultivation of habit is not the principal reason for teaching handwork to children. We learn to make good bread because we like to eat it. And we learn to make baskets or boxes or books or bags because it is a pleasure to be able to make them. A little girl of four years will cheerfully make a doll's handkerchief, stitching her first hem. Ignorant of difficulties, children will attempt to produce boats or houses, nothing daunted by the problems of construction. But we want to keep a high standard of attainment before them. If badges were awarded to scouts or guides for the first successful piece of leatherwork or basketry, for instance, a wrong attitude to craftsmanship would be assumed. The class teacher must plan schemes of work in the various materials, particularly in cardboard modelling, to lead the pupils step by step from one difficulty to the next, each step being founded on the previous ones. Such deliberate and careful training enables the teacher really to stand aside and let the pupils do their own work. Slipshod work can then be banned as a fault, because it is not due to excusable ignorance.

The following handicrafts are learnt by House of Education students: Needlework, knitting and rug-making; round cane basketwork, chair caning and coloured raffia weaving, darning,

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and coiled basketry; cardboard modelling, paper folding, paper modelling and bookbinding; clay modelling; leather embossing, staining and thonging; woodcarving; and (sometimes) metal repoussé.

It is possible to initiate all these crafts during the two years' training because several of them need the same kind of workmanship, *e.g.*, cardboard modelling, bookbinding, making up leather models; and others give scope for the aesthetic sense in various materials. For example, choice of colour is exercised in the decoration of cardboard models, in staining leather, in raffia work and in needlework. Sewing is practised with coloured threads on canvas, or on unbleached and coloured cloth according to Miss Swanson's method in "Educational Needlecraft." Again, the same ideas which are given for modelling in clay or plasticine can be used in leather embossing, wood carving and metal repoussé.

As the students learn handicrafts in order to teach them to the Parents' Union School children, they learn the beginnings of a good many, rather than continue to practise one or two until they have attained a high degree of skill. They can attain such skill later on while working alongside of their pupils, if they have been shown the main principles on which their practice should be founded. Thus it is important that cardboard modelling should be continued under supervision until the worker has learnt the principles of construction with card, cloth, glue and paper, has gained experience of the limitations of the materials, and proved the necessity for accuracy. The training involved also prepares the student for making up leather work neatly and durably, or for cutting the boards, backs and corners for book covers accurately and rapidly; and the care of tools, *e.g.*, keeping the knife properly sharpened, and using the bone folder to give a nice finish, becomes habitual. For these reasons, the students begin cardboard and paper modelling in their first year, along with needlework and basketwork, and carry it on until their fourth term where it is contemporary with bookbinding and precedes leatherwork. One lesson

a week in each craft is all that there is time for, each lesson being of about an hour's duration, except that the needlework period lasts longer. On an average about forty lessons in cardboard and paper modelling fall to the lot of each student because for the reasons explained above, the student must go through a graded course of models herself in order to  
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appreciate the difficulty of the tasks which she will have to set for her pupils. The child is subject to the discipline of consequences, so the teacher must know enough to set a scheme of work within his powers in order that he may learn something new with each model, maintaining the habits which he has acquired while advancing step by step. Teachers therefore are taken, as rapidly as their individual skill permits, through an approved course of instruction in fitting cloth-binding to various angles, learning the various joints for making solid models, the hinges, pockets, and modes of fitting lids to boxes, basing the design on the square, triangle, hexagon, octagon or circle, practising the free-cutting of curves and binding with cloth on the cross. With this experience the teacher is enabled to set models suited to the age of the child and so to grade the work for the individual that interest may be kept up and variety introduced while the hand and eye are being trained gradually. A child who suggests making a chest of drawers before he is expert enough to fit the drawers, a very difficult matter, may be allowed to make one in paper first unless he is one who can be led to visualise the details and content himself with learning them separately on simpler models. If he is ambitious to make a round box, he must first be taught to model the napkin-ring; the flat pocket must precede the folding pocket. A method once learnt is always to be practised, not to be abandoned as the pupil grows independent. One cannot insist on this unless sound methods are taught, and cardboard modelling proves a valuable training to the student who has been through no such course before. But it has the peculiarity that you must have progressed a good way before the charm and beauty of it take hold of you, unless you have a natural taste and aptitude for geometrical forms and accurate measurements.

The difficulty of grading a succession of models to suit a child's previous attainments can be illustrated further from cane weaving. Chair caning on small stools or frames is suitable for little ones. But the most difficult part of a basket is making the base, which comes first. The easiest part is weaving the sides and this becomes monotonous in large baskets. Little children may make their first baskets on wooden bases, supplied by firms like the Dryad Co., in various sizes. When the fingers are used to handling cane, the weaving of the base will not appear so formidable. It can be learnt first with a fine weaver,  
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to be replaced by a coarser one when the distance between the radiating spokes is great enough. The base, the sides, the border, footridge, handle, rings or hinges, are the parts of the basket which give occasion for variety, apart from the different types of weave, single or double cane, pairing or triple twist, flat, coloured or plaited insertions. To avoid monotony, two small baskets can be made instead of one big one, giving the opportunity of learning more than one border. Covering a bottle with cane for a picnic basket is a favourite occupation, or making a cane holder for a tumbler of hot water. But apart from the glass, the sides of a basket provide a kind of modelling and it is a difficult symmetry for some hands to achieve.

Usually clay modelling is found very much easier. There is a contrast between the two crafts just described and the more artistic ones of which clay modelling is the type. Skill in the

latter depends more entirely on "learning by doing," and the class teacher can give little help beyond providing opportunity and leading the pupil to see justly what she endeavours to reproduce in clay. This accounts for the fact that the House of Education students have two terms' lessons in basketwork to one in clay modelling. The sense of touch is developed in the fingers in course of time and ought to be cultivated from the earliest years. The preparation of the clay to the requisite degree of softness and uniformity is itself a training of the sense of touch and valuable to the student who has not had opportunities in her childhood. Early models should be simple, so that tools may not be necessitated unless for the finishing touches to such details as the stigma of an orange or the stalk of a leaf. The novice tends to give undue attention to surface details, roughness of texture, ribs or veins, before the form which they decorate has been moulded in proper proportions. So the clay modelling lesson cultivates the sense of proportion on which likeness depends far more than on detail. When we draw with pencil or chalk on a plain surface we are using a conventional method of depicting solid objects. But modelling is natural and congenial and should never be omitted from the art training. Attention should be concentrated on getting the solid form right in size or in proportion on every side and the model should be viewed from every angle repeatedly.

There are but two classes of objects from which copies can be selected: fruit forms and leaf forms. The latter

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term describes every shape enclosed by two curves and the former group includes all solids, such as shells or vases. In modelling the surface of such shapes and in cutting their outline, we have two sources of variety and beauty in all our later work: carving wood, embossing leather or beating out metal. Clay modelling makes an excellent preparation for modelling in these other materials, and, on a large scale, designs for the latter arts can be attempted and elaborated in clay. The difference is that one adds bit by bit to the surface of clay, while one cuts away or presses down the other materials. Clay can be touched by the fingers and tested with eyes closed to judge if the forms are pleasing and so can woodcarving. On leather the tool intervenes, but the worker soon learns that the tool will choose a curve that is pleasant to trace, although the delicate modelling of the surface must be judged by the effect of light and shade rather than by the sense of touch. After clay, leather is the next best material in which to give the idea of making the surface higher or lower and of outlining forms that are pleasing to the eye. The idea once grasped, the student has less hesitation in applying it to the harder materials. Hence it is worth while to start a course of woodcarving that can only last one term, because the worker having attacked the problem in the right spirit, gains knowledge even from her failures. For these arts depend upon the individual's enterprise. She has to be encouraged to try, to test, to prove what fingers and tools can do and to find delight in the process. If joy in handicraft lessons has not been felt at the outset, it usually breaks out in the second year when leather work begins, and it invariably overflows in the term devoted to woodcarving. On the one hand, certain habits have to be formed, certain rules to be followed, and this is realised in cardboard modelling which is rather a disciplinary subject. On the other hand, the worker's eyes must see beauty and her hands must endeavour to represent what she perceives. The result depends on taste, feeling, experience, reflection, repetition, for which opportunity must be given while the class teacher "exercises masterly inactivity." She shows the uses of the tools and demonstrates the nature of the materials, and the pupils must learn for themselves what

they can do with tools and materials.

Though there is only time to teach the initial steps of all these crafts, these are the important steps. In an old-fashioned woodcarving class where the instructor gave you [p 736]

a design, showed you how to cut it (for it probably repeated the same forms), sharpened your tools for you and finished off your work, you learnt the craft in a way that did not make for progress. The House of Education student is placed in a very different position when she is asked to see the form, say of an oak leaf, in the wood and to cut round it; or to carve the undulating leaf-surface on the wooden block before she has drawn the outline. The grain of the wood constrains her to guide the chisel in certain directions rather than others, and the problems which arise will be solved for the most part on the first free-cut model.

From such methods of teaching arise appreciation of all good carving and admiration for all beauties of craftsmanship. Persons who have practised handicrafts are better qualified to observe the greatness of architecture, the fitness of good house-planning, good furniture, and so on; they have better taste in choosing well-made and artistic things when shopping; and their own skill tends to make them condemn and reject all that is unsuitable, over-decorated, pretentious, false or ugly. They have a sense of power over materials and design which is proper to human beings and which begets a confidence which may well carry them through greater enterprises.

“Are you in earnest? Seize this very minute;  
What you can do, or dream you can, begin it;  
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!  
Only engage and then the mind grows heated;  
Begin it, and the work will be completed.”

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