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The Art and Practice of Narration.

Introduction

The teacher who allows his scholars the freedom of the city of books is at liberty to be their guide, philosopher and friend; and is no longer the mere instrument of forcible intellectual feeding. (Volume 6 p. 32)

We as teachers depreciate ourselves and our office; we do not realise that in the nature of things the teacher has a prophetic power of appeal and inspiration, that his part is not the weariful task of spoon-feeding with pap-meat, but the delightful commerce of equal minds where his is the part of guide, philosopher and friend. (Volume 6 p. 237)

Her Method covers the whole of a child's school life, in fact the whole of his life; the habit of narration is the means by which we all make anything our own to which we give full attention. (Kitching, Elsie. *Parents' Review,* "Repeated Narration," Volume 39, pp. 58-62)

…if we have eyes to see and grace to build, [narration] is the ground-plan of his education. (*Home Education,* p. 231)

What is Narration?

Narration is an art, like poetry-making or painting, because it is there in every child's mind, waiting to be discovered;...the child narrates, fluently, copiously, in ordered sequence, with fit and graphic details, with a just choice of words, without verbosity or tautology, as soon as he can speak with ease.

Narration is the children telling back what they read, hear, see and let this action of the mind be habitual. The small 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. (*Home Education,* p. 231)

Child is Born a Person

How injurious then is our habit of depreciating children; we water their books down and drain them of literary flavour, because we wrongly suppose that children cannot understand what we understand ourselves; what is worse, we explain and we question. A few pedagogic maxims should help us, such as, "Do not explain." "Do not question," "Let one reading of a passage suffice," "Require the pupil to relate the passage he has read." The child must read to know; his teacher's business is to see that he knows. All the acts of generalization, analysis, comparison, judgment, and so on, the mind performs for itself in the act of knowing. (*Towards a Philosophy of Education, p. 304)*

Self-Education

What is our fundamental principle? It is self-education. The small child who said “We narrate and then we know” had got hold of it. “The child is a person” and has a natural craving for knowledge. All we have to do is to satisfy this craving by providing ample intellectual food, and then to leave the child to assimilate the food for himself. He narrates and then he knows. He gives back what he has taken in, and so makes it his own possession. *(*Charlotte Mason, “*P.N.E.U. As A Service to the State,”* 1922, speech)

Assimilation of Ideas

“They must read the given pages and tell what they have read, they must perform, that is, what we may call the act of knowing. We are all aware, alas, what a monstrous quantity of printed matter has gone into the dustbin of our memories, because we have failed to perform that quite natural and spontaneous 'act of knowing,' as easy to a child as breathing and, if we would believe it, comparatively easy to ourselves.” (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 99)

To have narrated a passage satisfactorily implies, not a mere parrot-like committing to memory of words, but the having made that passage one's own—a part of oneself. It is not an easy thing to do at first, but improvement soon comes, and the child himself proves to us that what he has read once and narrated at a lesson, say, in October, is still clear in his memory when, at the December examinations, he is asked again for that piece of knowledge. (Millar, “A Liberal Education in Secondary Schools,” *Parents' Review*, Volume 31, p.175)

One thing at any rate we know with certainty, that no teaching, no information becomes knowledge to any of us until the individual mind has acted upon it, translated it, transformed, absorbed it, to reappear, like our bodily food, in forms of vitality. Therefore, teaching, talk and tale, however lucid or fascinating, effect nothing until self-activity be set up; that is, self-education is the only possible education; the rest is mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature. (*A Philosophy of Education, p. 240)*

The Structure of a Lesson

"Before the reading for the day begins, the teacher should talk a little (and get the children to talk) about the last lesson, with a few words about what is to be read, in order that the children may be animated by expectation; but she should beware of explanation and, especially, of forestalling the narrative. Then, she may read two or three pages, enough to include an episode; after that, let her call upon the children to narrate … The book should always be deeply interesting, and when the narration is over, there should be a little talk in which moral points are brought out, pictures shown to illustrate the lesson, or diagrams drawn on the blackboard." (*Home Education*, pp. 232-233)

Recall

"Before the reading for the day begins, the teacher should talk a little (and get the children to talk) about the last lesson…" (*Home Education*, p. 232)

"Every Lesson must recall the Last.—Let every lesson gain the child's entire attention, and let each new lesson be so interlaced with the last that the one must recall the other; that again, recalls the one before it, and so on to the beginning." (*Home Education*, p. 158)

Inspiring Idea

"Before the reading for the day begins, the teacher should talk … with a few words about what is to be read, in order that the children may be animated by expectation; but she should beware of explanation and, especially, of forestalling the narrative." (*Home Education*, pp. 232-233)

"…the function of education is to put the child in the way of relations proper to him, and to offer the inspiring idea which commonly initiates a relation..." (*School Education*, p. 78)

She continues a few pages later, "It rests with us to give the awakening idea..." (*School Education*, p. 81)

"Where and how are we to appeal to the imagination? At the beginning of the lesson ... Seed thoughts must be given by the teacher." (Cholmondeley, Essex. "Criticism Lessons: Some Personal Memories of Charlotte Mason," *Parents' Review*, Volume 74, pp. 159-162)

"The business of the teacher is to put his class in the right attitude towards their book by a word or two of his own interest in the matter contained, of his own delight in the manner of the author. But let [the student] get knowledge only as they dig for it." (*School Education*, p. 229)

Experience With Living Material

"The children must enjoy the book. The ideas it holds must each make that sudden, delightful impact upon their minds must cause that intellectual stir, which mark the inception of an idea … The labor of thought is what his book must induce in the child." (*School Education*, pp. 178-179)

Narration

"He will not be satisfied with the result but he will find that in the act of narrating every power of his mind comes into play, that points and bearings which he had not observed are brought out; that the whole is visualized and brought into relief in an extraordinary way; in fact, that scene or argument has become a

part of his personal experience; he knows, he has assimilated what he has read. This is not memory work." (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 16)

"He will recast, condense, illustrate, or narrate with vividness and with freedom the arrangement of his words." (*School Education,* pp. 224-225)

"By the way, it is very important that children should be allowed to narrate in their own way … A narration should be original as it comes from a child—that is, his own mind should have acted upon the matter it has received." *(Home Education,* p. 289)

Further Consideration

Discussion, Questions from the Child, Recapitulation, Continued Notebook Work

"The book should always be deeply interesting, and when the narration is over, there should be a little talk in which moral points are brought out, pictures shown to illustrate the lesson, or diagrams drawn on the blackboard." (*Home Education*, p. 232-233)

"Then talk the narrative over with them…" (*Home Education*, p. 251)

"The teachers give sympathy and occasionally elucidate, sum up or enlarge, but the actual work is done by the scholars." (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 6)

"…The less parents and teachers talk-in and expound their rations of knowledge and thought to the children they are educating, the better for the children … Children must be allowed to ruminate, must be left alone with their own thoughts. They will ask for help if they want it." (*School Education*, p. 162)

"Let the pupil write for himself half a dozen questions which cover the passage studied…" (*School Education*, p. 181)

"One thing at any rate we know with certainty, that no teaching, no information becomes knowledge to any of us until the individual mind has acted upon it, translated it, transformed, absorbed it, to reappear, like our bodily food, in forms of vitality." (*Towards a Philosophy of Education,* p. 240)

"It is a delightful thing about this School of yours that the Scholars love their books; I know, because every post brings me a letter from some one to say so, and besides, I can tell by the way you answer your examination questions. When all the papers reach me I often say, "this is a very happy week for me"; I am happy because your papers show me that you have had a delightful term's work and that you LOVE KNOWLEDGE.

I think that is a joyful thing to be said about anybody, that he loves knowledge; there are so many interesting and delightful things to be known and the person who loves knowledge cannot very well be dull; indoors and out of doors there are a thousand interesting things to know and to know better.

There is a saying of King Alfred's that I like to apply to our School,--"I have found a door," he says. That is just what I hope your School is to you--a door opening into a great palace of art and knowledge in which there are many chambers all opening into gardens or field paths, forest or hills… indeed you could label a good many of the doorways from the headings of your term's programme.

But you will remember that the School is only a "Door" to let you in to the goodly House of Knowledge, but I hope you will go in and out and live there all your lives--in one pleasant chamber and another; for

the really rich people are they who have the entry to this goodly House, and who never let King Alfred's 'Door' rust on its hinges, no, not all through their lives, even when they are very old people.

I have a great hope for all you dear Scholars of the P.U.S., other people will be a little the better because you love knowledge, and have learnt to think fair, just thoughts about things, and to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven in which is all that is beautiful, good and happy-making." (Charlotte Mason, "Letter to Students," *Parents' Review*. Volume 23 (1912), pp. 486-487.

Additional Sample Lessons from the *Parents' Review*

Subject: Plutarch's *Lives* • Class II • Time 20 minutes By A. C. Edgar *Parents' Review,* 1906, pp. 496-497

Objects

I. To help Gerry to form relations with the past.

II. To give him some further insight into the character of Pericles.

III. To increase his power of attention.

IV. To give him practice in narration.

Lesson

Step I.—Ask him to narrate what he has already learned of the war with the Samians.

Step II.—To find on a map the places which he has mentioned.

Step III.—Explain that the map is coloured so as to show distinctly the land belonging to three great Grecian tribes. Thus Gerry will be able to see that both the Athenians and the Samians were Ionians.

Step IV.—Read to him *Pericles*, p. 42. "Pericles . . . sea," p. 43.

Step V.—Ask him if there is anything in the reading which he has not understood, and, if so, to explain to him his difficulties.

Step VI.—Ask him to narrate the passage read.

Step VII.—Draw his attention to some of the striking features of the scene at the rostrum, and ask him what qualities Pericles' conduct there indicated.

Step VIII.—Read him the next paragraph, showing him on the map the places mentioned and explaining his difficulties.

Step IX.—Ask him to narrate what has been read.

Subject: Physical Geography
• Group: Science • Class II • Time: 30 minutes By Vera Bishop *Parents' Review,* 1909, pp. 794-795

Objects

I. To give the children some idea of the way in which rivers affect the surface of the land.

II. To further their interest in the physical features of the neighbourhood of Ambleside, and to give them something to look for during their walks.

III. To give them the meaning of one geographical term, by actual experiment.

Lesson

Step I.—Ask the children what they remember of last lesson, to see if they know the general rule, *i.e.*, "that all great cities of the world are situated on the banks, or near the mouths of great rivers." Examples.

Step II.—Find out from the children meaning of "Alluvium." Illustrate by handful of gravel and sand dropped into glass of water. Example of river bringing down deposit of mud—the Brathay running into Lake Windermere and filling it up.

Step III.—Find river Avon on maps. Find out from children peculiarities of its course—winding.

Step IV.—Find out from children what they have noticed at curves of a river—small cliff formed by the action of the water at the outside curve, and bank of mud on inside. Show illustration.

Step V.—Draw diagram on blackboard of curve in the course of Scandale Beck, exhibiting the same features, and ask them to study the spot next walk, and make plans of its curves.

Step VI.—Find out, from children if possible how the courses of streams are altered; slips of earth from banks, trees, large rocks, fall into the river bed and change the direction of the current. Read extract from *Physical Geography*, Giekie, pages 247-248.

Step VII.—Causes of floods,—rains, melting of snow, etc.

Step VIII.—Formation of banks of river. In time of flood the river rises above its usual level, and deposits mud on either side. This process, in course of time, raises the height of the banks.

Step IX.—River bed. Stream always bringing down mud, and depositing it in the bed of the river, so that it, in time, gets filled up, and the river will become broad and shallow, instead of narrow and deep, or it will choose some other path to the sea.

Step X.—Find out from children what kind of soil would be left by the deposit of the river; large quantities of vegetable matter, broken up by the water are in the deposit, and this makes the soil very rich. Example. River Nile which overflows its banks once every year.

Step XI.—Read from *This World of Ours*, page 223-225. Children reading in turn.

Step XII.—Narration.

Subject: The Sciences—Steam • Group: Science • Class II • Time: 25 minutes By Dorothy Chalmers

Parents' Review, 1909, p. 795

Objects

I. To demonstrate to the children the properties of steam.

II. To show by practical experiment the principle on which all steam engines are made.

III. To help the children to realize the simplicity of this principle and the wonderful results obtained from it.

Lesson

Step I.—Remind the children of their last lesson by a few questions on the Fahrenheit and Centigrade Thermometers.

Step II.—Find out what they know about steam, and show by boiling water in a glass flask that true steam is invisible. What we see coming out of the flask is steam condensed by the cold atmosphere into watery vapour. By applying heat to the condensed steam change it again into true invisible steam. To prove that the steam is really there hold a spoon in the space and it will become moist.

Step III.—Ask the children what are some of the uses of steam (to work machinery); and explain by a diagram on the board how we utilize steam to work engines. Also demonstrate by a crank shaft with two rods.

Diagram—The Sciences, page 92.

Step IV.—Ask the children to recapitulate the lesson, and suggest the tremendous differences made to the world by the invention of the steam engine.