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Author(s): Louise Pound

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WHAT SHOULD BE EXPECTED OF THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH?

LOUISE POUND
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska

I

It must be somewhat dismaying for the impressionable secondary-school teacher of English to hear at pedagogical gatherings and to read in pedagogical journals what is expected of her, beyond the teaching of her subject, by many school administrative authorities and by society in general. She is told that the tastes in reading of her pupils during their school years and consequently the reading and speech habits of their lifetimes—and not only this but the destinies of her pupils as citizens—are wholly in her hands. These are pretty sweeping responsibilities. It might indeed be inferred from the exhortations of the “talent” at association meetings, often, too, from laymen’s letters to newspapers and from editorials, that the teaching of her special subject, its essential content, landmarks, criteria, laws, is the least important task of the teacher of English instead of her primary task. She has her own particular niche to fill in the educational scheme, like the teachers of other subjects. Yet it could have but little of her attention were she to strive to carry out *in toto* the large ambitions which are urged upon her. The aims set before her by some of her mentors at association meetings are often less germane to her particular subject than they are to other subjects. Frequently

they are the ideals belonging to the school life of the pupils and to the secondary-school system as a whole, rather than the ideals which should predominate in the classrooms of some one subject. The English teacher is urged to devote her main efforts to accomplishing ends which the school as a whole and the teaching force as a whole, strive as they will, cannot wholly accomplish. Assuredly she deserves a modicum of compassion as she sits at the feet of professional speakers, hears their reproaches, and realizes the extent to which the failings of contemporary society are brought to her door.

II. THE TEACHER AND "OUTSIDE READING"

What, indeed, are the matters fairly belonging to the English teacher's special subject of study? The teacher may justly be held to account for the conduct of study in the classroom, and she should be ambitious to influence the reading to which the pupil finds his way outside the classroom. But she should not be given the responsibility for the latter, and its character is no test of the success or failure of her courses. What is read outside the classroom is reading for recreation. The teacher may have ambitions concerning it, but she is not accountable for it. Many assume that she is accountable. I recall a middle western superintendent, a man of more than ordinary ability, who took a referendum as to the outside reading of the high-school pupils of his region and seemed deeply impressed and somewhat aghast to learn that the boys and girls read habitually the works of George Barr McCutcheon, Harold Bell Wright, and Gene Stratton-Porter, while "none of them read Shakespeare or Milton or other classics" out of hours. And he seemed to argue therefrom with considerable effectiveness that because the pupils read for their recreation works of minor contemporary fiction rather than the "classics," reading of the type which they liked should be made the subject of their study, rather than Shakespeare and Milton, since these "do not interest them." Indeed, some of the literature recommended for the English courses, to the exclusion of masterpieces of permanent interest, is surprising because of its impermanence. I have heard able speakers recom-

mend Harold Bell Wright for classroom study, instead of certain nineteenth-century British and American poets. "Boys do not like poetry." The school years are those when the memory is most tenacious, when what is learned and its influence abide through life, if anything does. Minor fiction and fugitive pieces in contemporary light periodicals have their value; they may be used incidentally in the classroom, for illustration or for collateral reading, and they should be so used. Yet they are not significant enough to be worth remembering for a lifetime. Why use them to displace something which the world will still cherish and find significant long after the present generation has passed?

The teacher herself hardly reads Shakespeare outside the classroom for recreation, when she is concerned with him professionally within the classroom. She seeks change. I recall one very popular college teacher whose favorite recreative reading was Florence Barclay. Should we expect of the pupils what we do not expect of the teacher? I recall also a professor, a profound scholar and the author of works of much importance for human society, who read for recreation, avidly and omnivorously, detective stories, love stories, best sellers, anything light that came his way. Why not? He dealt with solid enough things within hours, and he deserved the privilege out of hours of reading what he would. Why should it surprise and grieve the collegiate teacher of English if her pupils choose for recreative reading the *Saturday Evening Post* instead of the *Atlantic Monthly*, or if they prefer Ella Wheeler Wilcox to Masfield's sonnets? It might be that, but for their training in school, the reading of our pupils would be confined to the *Police Gazette*, if this periodical still circulates, or to yellow newspapers, or, more likely still, to nothing at all. The student of "American ideals" can certainly find them in the *Saturday Evening Post* as well as in the *Atlantic*. If their classroom time is devoted to difficult things on which they need help and which they will never know if not from the classroom, young people ought to be allowed relaxation when outside the classroom; and it is the exceptional young person who would find this in "uplift" essays and "classical" poetry. They seek diversion in reading matter as naturally as they seek it in vaudeville programs or in sports.

The teacher can do her best to impart sound tastes and right social ideals through the classroom; but her conscience should not burden itself nor should her course be "junked" if, after she has done her best in school hours, the literary preoccupations of her pupils out of hours fall short of the severest ideals of her critics. There are limits to what she can accomplish, and there are limits to her responsibility.

III. THE PUPILS AND THE "CLASSICS"

We are often told that it is the duty of the teacher of English to bring her pupils to "love" the classics. That she fails to do this, much or most of the time, is often made a subject of complaint. The teacher may not herself love all the classics that she teaches. She may care for Shelley's poems and not for Wordsworth's; she may care for Spenser's and not for Milton's; for Browning's and not for Tennyson's; or she and her pupils, like many teachers and pupils, may care for prose while they do not in their hearts care for verse. But it is assumed that a first duty of the teacher is to impart this love, and to do it unintermittently, as it were, and *en bloc*. When she has not imparted it she has failed. Many—the type is familiar—hold that because of such failure to universalize devotion to masterpieces among the pupils no attempt should be made to teach masterpieces in the secondary schools at all. They are convinced that some contemporary bit of patriotic or sentimental verse, readable now though the world will have forgotten it in a few years, is better worthy of study in the classroom period than are "outworn" pieces like Gray's *Elegy* or the plays of Shakespeare. Again and again one hears speakers who seem to leave the inference with their audiences that the teacher should attempt to teach her pupils not what belongs to, or has primary significance for, her subject, but what the as yet undeveloped tastes of her pupils may happen to prefer. Not the accepted standards, or the larger outlook for her subject, should determine the choice of material for classroom study but the preferences of those who are beginning the subject. How easy it is to predict that, in the latter case, the material selected will be that making least demands on pupil and teacher and in the long run affording a minimum of intellectual discipline.

The assumption underlying criticism of this character is of doubtful validity. The teacher of literature should not feel that it is obligatory upon her to impart love of the classics, especially of all the classics, to her pupils. Rather is hers the less ambitious duty to make her pupils know and understand the works which they study. This is not a utopian ideal. It is one which she can carry out. The "love" which is imparted is the personal affair of the pupils and must be left to take care of itself. It cannot be forced. No matter what the spell-binding powers of the teacher may be, not all the members of the same class will like the same things, nor should all be expected to like the things which the teacher likes. In well-planned courses there should be variety enough for all. And no member of the class should be expected to like *all* the pieces studied. Possibly he may like none of them, and yet the study of them may be salutary for him. But he can be made familiar with them, and he can be made to understand them. That of itself widens his horizon and enriches his intellectual life. There is analogy here with history. The fairly advanced student of history may come to love King Alfred, or Lincoln, or Roosevelt; but whether he find them admirable or lovable or not, he must come to know also Machiavelli and Napoleon and Bismarck. The attitude of a class toward these latter men, or toward the first-named, for that matter, is no gauge of the success or failure of the work of a teacher of history. The fairly advanced student of literature should know and understand the work of Swift, or Carlyle, or Walt Whitman; but whether the writings of these men are material for his affection is another affair. The sentiments of students—their sentiments in advance toward the authors whom they study—afford no proper criterion of the value of their study in relation to the subject as a whole or of its utility for themselves. The attempt should be made to help them know what they ought to know, so far as may be, and to insure that they understand it, so far as may be; but it should not be felt that their devotion and their enthusiasm can be had to order.

IV. THE TEACHER AND "CITIZENSHIP"

Among the many ambitious things expected of the teacher of English the most ambitious is that she should be held to chief

accountability for the teaching of "citizenship." The civic education of her pupils is not primarily her affair, though it may be secondarily her affair. Those teachers who are overzealous in this regard—and there are such—are usually those who fail most markedly in imparting knowledge of their ostensible subject. The time taken for one set of things is taken at the expense of another set of things. The more of the class period pre-empted for the discussion of outside topics, the less remains for topics which need all the time available for them. Usually the teachers who most emphasize the extraneous and collateral, rather than their specific subjects, are those who are themselves weakest and most uninterested in their subjects, and who leave their pupils weakest and most uninterested.

The following passage is from an article in a recent number of a pedagogical journal. The article is a good one, and chiefly it points out how teachers should select and utilize the material for English study with a view to influencing future society. Nevertheless the passage suggests the tendency to map out for the English teacher more than may fairly be expected of her; and to induce her to subordinate her subject proper to endeavors too large for her legitimate field.

If teachers of English were to make a survey of the needs of the American people and were then to make a list and a classification of the ideals which, if made in common, would best meet these dominant needs, we should have a very good guide for the selection of literature. . . . Among these ideals which . . . must be made the driving forces of all Americans we find respect for property rights, chastity, monogamy, parental love, respect for age and womanhood, sympathy with suffering and affliction, self-sacrifice and self-denial, personal integrity, loyalty, friendship, cleanliness and personal purity, altruism, achievement, truth loving, simplicity, work, health, initiative, independence, patriotism, national unity, local self-government, right use of property, ennobled ideals of sexual love, ambition of right types, peace and good will, unprejudiced observation and inductive thinking, scientific method, efficiency and expertness, respect for authority and human brotherhood. . . . Parents send their children to school to be lifted up and inspired by such ideals. We English teachers can get from such a list a sense of relative values in our work that the old-time teacher . . . never attained.

The teacher who set about to teach this list of virtues, subordinating her year's work in English, would be lost. Need it be reiterated

that preparation for citizenship is the aim of all secondary-school work? It is especially to be kept in mind in influencing the extra-classroom activities of the pupils, which are now recognized as so important in the life of the schools. To prepare its pupils for citizenship is incontestably one of the two chief aims of the school. By means of school programs and school organization, the young people of America must be reached, to elevate American ideals and to improve American social and political conditions. This ideal for the schools must penetrate the classrooms, too, if the modern educational program is to be carried through. But the teaching of citizenship is a collateral, not a chief, aim of the English class. The latter has to do with the use of language, written or oral, and with the content and modes and types of literature. The "citizenship" ideal should find its place most of all in classrooms in history and civics. In the pedagogical scheme, each subject required for the building of the total character has its niche, and the chief duty of the teacher of any subject is to teach that subject to the best of her ability. She must make it as interesting and valuable as she can; but unless she devotes herself mainly to her subject, she is slacking in her contribution to the whole.

Let each teacher feel responsibility for the total structure, to the neglect of her own stones in its foundation, and the structure is likely to collapse. The teachers of English, and of history, mathematics, language, science, can link their work with the present by illustration from contemporary happenings, or can indicate moral lessons when the latter may fairly be drawn from the day's assignment; and can emphasize incidental topics by references to local or national conditions. Every good teacher strives to do this. But it is her primary business to teach her subject. She should not usurp to herself the ideal of the general system of education and of all society.

v

Doubtless there is exaggeration in some of the preceding remarks. There is exaggeration enough assuredly in the generalizations of the critics of the teacher of English; exaggeration in response ought to be legitimate. But I know of nothing likely

to bring more irresponsibility in teaching, more neglect of fundamentals, more that will promote surface knowledge and substitute facile discussion for real acquisition, than too great neglect of the specific for the hortatory. In many classrooms the tendency is already pronounced to let outside things have priority over solid acquirement of the real subject. I recall a speaker addressing a group of English teachers, who made reference to a recent revelation of political corruption on a large scale in a mid-western city—and then seemed to place the responsibility for it on the teachers of English in the city schools. What, he asked, was taught in the English classes in that city? Did the citizens inquire, and did they seek at once for reorganization here? Did they understand where the fault lay? That the corrupt politicians were educated in another generation, in other towns, by other teachers, had no weight with him. He pointed his finger at the group he was addressing and drove home to each the guilt of her sisters and of herself.

The building of character, the development of a responsible body of citizens to watch its affairs, are important things for a democracy. They are vastly important. But these have at the present time their share of attention from school administrators. They are bound up with the school system as a whole. Though they may have been neglected in the past they will not be neglected in the future. And the school system has another object, the preservation, handing on, and increase of human learning. The responsibility for this does rest primarily on the teacher. This too is vastly important for civilization, for without it there is retrogression. The schools must train and encourage those who are to preserve, increase, and diffuse human knowledge; realization of this function of education must not be allowed to wane. Solid acquisition in various branches of learning may not be dispensed with or neglected, or disparaged. The badgered teacher of English should teach her subject as conscientiously as she can, always with a view to its place in the larger educational scheme; but she should not despair if she must hand over somewhat of the salvation of society to her superiors and to her colleagues.