NEW PROBLEMS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

I am not a business man. Once only, so far as I can remember, have I ever attempted to sell anything. It was some hens, to my brother, long ago. After the deal, as I supposed, had been completed, but before the purchaser had actually taken possession, the hens were stolen, and I have never been able to collect a penny. Thus, I have argued the case many times, during the past thirty years, and still hope that my brother will eventually see the error and pay me three dollars with accrued interest. I am not a business man, but I do know that in every large city there is an agency which keeps books wherein are recorded the financial ratings of all going concerns—frightful ledgers which lay bare every element of weakness and strength. There are no Bradstreet agencies in the educational field, no universally respected judges to whom one may apply for trustworthy ratings. If opinions openly expressed in many quarters are of any value, the teaching of English, like many a business concern in these days of depression, is not in good standing. Its credit is impaired. You know this as well as I.

What do the colleges say about the young people whom we send them? What don't they say—Harvard and Wellesley and Columbia and universities of the Middle West, the Pacific Coast, and the South! Freshman classes in grammar and punctuation! Juniors conditioned in spelling! Even though you disapprove the College Entrance Examination Board, you cannot wholly ignore its findings; for between ten and fifteen thousand from all parts of the country take the Board examinations every June. Statistics are not at hand, but it is safe to say that only about one-half of those who try the Board's English tests receive a rating of sixty or above. History alone has a poorer record. What are business men saying about young stenographers and sales clerks? You know. Now that war and politics are at low ebb, the metropolitan editorial writer takes an occasional shot at the way English is taught, and the comic weekly—\textit{Life}, for example—finds the way that English is taught a subject for mirth. School officials, of late, are openly expressing doubt whether this relatively new branch of study, which has had such a mushroom growth during the last two decades, is worth the time and the money it requires. How do boys and girls rate English, nowadays? Do they put it on a level with mathematics and chemistry, or associate it with choir practice and physical training? What do teachers of mathematics and chemistry think of the English department? I wonder. I wonder what the average English teacher thinks—on blue Mondays. I wonder—I wonder how much longer you will let me go on with this gloomy anthology.

Why don't some of you rise up in wrath and smite me, or at least say firmly, "Sir, you exaggerate. We know that all is not as it should be; anyone can see that at present we are playing a losing game. But the situation is not half so bad as you picture it. Hostile criticism and ridicule notwithstanding, you know perfectly well that in many quarters wonders are still being accomplished. Good teachers are performing miracles daily, and many are toiling faithfully with substantial results. English instructors the country over are an intelligent, enthusiastic, hardworking set. We are not ashamed of their record, if one considers all the hampering conditions."

You are right. I do exaggerate. English teachers are, rank and file, a good lot. There are hampering conditions. These conditions, some permanent, some temporary, some affecting all branches of instruction, some peculiar to English, I wish to review with you; yet not primarily by way of apology for meager results, but as a necessary preliminary to constructive suggestions looking toward improvement.

\textit{First, the amazing increase in high school attendance.} Think of the growth in your city during the past twenty years. With more schools, larger schools, larger English departments, more teachers, larger class units, we are no longer retailers but wholesalers; we are quantity producers of what must be,
almost perforce, machine made goods. A large degree of necessary uniformity, hateful to strong individualities in the English department as in no other, renders ineffectual the natural, simple, wholesome methods of instruction so conspicuously effective twenty years ago.

Second, the growing heterogeneity of the school-attending population. I have in mind not alone racial complexity, but the widening gamut of mental, cultural capacity due to the invasion of high schools by children from the lower strata, at a time when so many from the best unified element in the conglomeration are slipping away to more select private schools. We welcome the children of the foreign born, usually ambitions, appreciative, teachable. We welcome those who are climbing somewhat gropingly, as if by blind instinct, to higher social levels. They are all good educational stuff. But we cannot shut our eyes to the obvious fact that such material calls for special treatment—a slower pace, a less ambitious goal, greater forbearance and sympathy, a much larger expenditure of vitality, a higher degree of skill. We have made some progress, but it may be many years before we learn how to handle economically this new situation.

Third, the growing complexity of the school curriculum. English courses, classical courses, scientific, commercial, manual courses; a wide range of electives—music, art, physical training; school clubs and associations, a distressing number of which are nearly smothering the English department,—what a contrast to the simple program of a generation ago! And meanwhile the school day has shrunk an hour or two, and the school year a week or two, and study and conference periods are disappearing, and department is grappling with department for a lion's share of the pupil's time; and English, perhaps because we teachers of English are by nature too nicely bred to grab, perhaps because our subject is such that it can be slighted without immediate catastrophe, gets what time is left, if any is left, while old-fashioned session-room singing grows into a choir, and the choir breeds courses in music appreciation and harmony, and glee clubs, and dances with concerts, and a full-fledged orchestra springs up (or spring up; I can't quite make out whether the subject of this sentence is singular or plural) over night. Thus it goes I have somewhere read that a bill was once introduced in the old Irish parliament to the effect that every pint measure should thereafter hold a quart.

Fourth, the growing complexity of life itself as the young now live it. What a lot is always going on! How much time church organizations alone demand of the young; and how much more is demanded by civic or patriotic associations with their drives and their pageants and their plays and their prize competitions. I believe in the Scout movement, but Scouting takes time. It is wholesome for a boy to earn a dollar now and then; but there are parents not a few who are blindly exploiting their children, making them steady wage-earners at twelve or fourteen. The high school is becoming a part-time institution. There are music lessons. There are dancing schools. I refrain from mentioning a long list of social diversions, and the fact that nowadays it takes considerable time to do one's hair even if heads are "bobbed." Enough has been said to warrant the statement that time for doing tasks out of school is not abundant, and that vitality pays toll to many interests—a condition for which boys and girls are not wholly to blame. There should be stringent game laws for the protection of youth.

Perhaps I should apologize for dwelling upon these four well recognized conditions, for they have received much attention of late. Two more remain which are not so commonly mentioned, though I think they deserve thoughtful consideration.

The first of these is the present day spirit of youth. I cannot adequately define it, nor trace it to any six capital sources; nor will I utterly denounce it, nor prophesy where it will lead. I do not think it possible wholly to change it by removing discoverable sources, nor do I advocate prosecuting it as criminal, nor absolutely complying with its demands. I can do little more than proclaim it. Boys and girls of today are not like the boys and girls of the previous generation. You know it. Human nature, it is true, does not change; but it is characteristic of human nature, under certain conditions, to pass through strange moods. What has wrought the change? Moving pictures, jazz, and the automobile? Is it the first page or pictorial section prominence given to the activities and the facial charms of school children? Can it be traced in part to new methods of teaching? Is it the war, which made men and
women of boys and girls, filled their pockets with spending money, loosened restraint in school and home and made it almost necessary to sanction undesirable liberty? Are the fascinating newspapers and the cheapest magazines, which are so rapidly displacing books; periodicals furnishing a panorama of all that happens, scandalous and otherwise—are they to blame? Is it the morals of pleasure-loving elders, or a reflection of the mood of unskilled labor suddenly thrust into unwonted prosperity and power? I do not know. But I sometimes wonder if the Hamelin magician has not wiped away our boys and girls and substituted changeling youth prematurely old, high tensioned, craving excitement, unable to concentrate, impatient under all restraint, skeptical concerning all authority, scorching any past more remote than day before yesterday, confident of the spirit and to give it free rein are alike fatal.

And now, with many misgivings, I summon courage to mention a sixth and last condition, the activity of educational experimenters and reformers. I call the roll, and out step opposing champions, each with plausible slogan.

"Read, read, read. Make the young read quantities of books. It is the only way to teach literature—or composition, for that matter."

"You're wrong. Read a few things thoroughly. Teach how to read, not how to skim."

"Read the works of contemporaries—new books, periodicals, live matter. Masterpieces are for mature minds, the cultured few."

"Read nothing but the best. Shield the young from the tawdry, bawdry trash of the unfortunate present."

"Let the child select his own reading."

"As well let him select his food and clothes. What are teachers for?"

"Keep the literature course cultural."

"Kultur! Haven't we had enough of it? Make the course practical."

"There's no such thing as English grammar. Give language a chance to grow, naturally, vigorously. Don't curb."

"You are right, sir, if you mean formal grammar. What we need is functional grammar. That's the trouble with formal grammar; it doesn't function."

"I say you are both wrong. What we need is good old fashioned grammar. It is the foundation of all expression. Technique and effective workmanship are synonymous. Drill everlastingly in grammatical technique."

"Teach self-expression."

"Self-expression! Get rid of this comic idea. Language functions mainly in plain portering, the transmission of thought untouched by personality."

"Teach composition as an art.

"Art! Teach it as a tool."

"Motivate everything."

"It can't be done. The boys and girls need hard drill."

"Socialize the recitation. Let the pupils do the teaching."

"Why have teachers at all!"

"The project method is the thing. It is so practical, and it interests the children. That is the trouble, nowadays; the children are not interested."

"Away with all projectiles; the war is over. Keep the children hard at it!"

"Correct all written work."

"Correct none. Let the children do it."

"Correct by scale. Be scientific."

"Rubbish! A satisfactory scale for measuring self-expression is an impossibility."

"Separate the swift from the slow. Do it with my intelligence test."

"Don't. This is a democracy. We should mix, not segregate."

Well, as the psychologist would say, what is your "reaction" to this roll call: I gravely remark that in each case of conflicting opinion much might be said on both sides. Much is being said. I venture to add that all these champions cannot be right, and that it must be exceedingly difficult for young and inexperienced teachers to decide which are right and which are wrong. Experimentation is a sign of vigorous life. The Middle West is to be commended for the splendid courage, the audacity, with which she tries and rejects and tries again,
while the conservative East looks on distrustfully yet not without a degree of envy. Out of the medley of conflicting opinion, good will undoubtedly come; but at present we are suffering, East and West, from the activity of extremists, each of whom, enrapured by some method or devise—never, so far as my observation goes, a new one—exalts it unduly.

Thus far I have done two things. I have given English teaching a rating—low, almost disheartening; I have enumerated conditions which, it seems to me, partly explain why the rating is so low—conditions which must be kept in mind as we meet unflinchingly the criticism that is pouring in from all sides and calmly consider what we ought to do. If I now have the temerity to offer a constructive program, please remember that the ideas and ideals do not come from any seat of authority but from a plain teacher who has taught so many years and has seen so many theories, methods, and devices come and go, that he has acquired a keen sense of human fallibility, particularly his own.

My first suggestion is that we redefine our aims; and because present conditions demand retrenchment, rigid economy, that we limit attention to the essential minima. Here is my definition:

1. To lead the young into habits of correct, clear, truthful expression. Notice please, the word habits, and think how habits are formed. Then dwell upon the three adjectives: correct, which sternly implies obedience to language laws; clear, which recognizes implicitly that a composition fails unless it transmits intelligibly the message it bears; truthful, which directs attention to what, in our teaching, is sometimes overlooked, the responsibility of speaker or writer toward subject matter. Habits of correct, clear, truthful expression: not a word, you notice, about training for authorship, nor training for citizenship, nor character-building; no exalting of oral or of written expression—just habits of correct, clear, truthful expression. This six-word definition is broad enough, practical enough, ethical enough, for me.

2. To train the young, through habit-forming practice, to get from the printed page what has been put there, and to properly value what they get. Is this definition too narrow? Think what the printed page may contain: facts, a picture, a chain of incidents, a course of reasoning; a flight of imagination, an appeal to the emotions; melody, exquisite artistry, the charm of personality. To get and to properly value: that is not a mean task for anybody, old or young. Is the definition too exacting? Not if properly interpreted with a true sense of the limitations of immature minds. It does suggest that English, properly taught, is not a snap course, nor necessarily a vague one, and certainly not a course in mere aesthetic enjoyment. It corrects, I hope, the notion that the English Department is an entertainment bureau, and the recitation hour a sort of party. It announces that upon the shoulders of English instructors rests a tremendous responsibility, especially in times like the present when the printed page is so influential and propaganda so cunningly disguised, and our young are exposed as never before to a deluge of print in which the false and the true are not easily distinguishable, and the cheap and the coarse are set forth in alluring colors.

3. To give the young an intimate acquaintance with perhaps thirty pieces of good literature, varied in kind, a less intimate acquaintance with two or three times as many more, and a general knowledge of what else an educated person should, as he finds opportunity, try to read. Notice that there is no prescription as to whether the pieces shall be English, American, or Japanese, modern or ancient; they must simply be good and varied. Notice that a few are designed for permanent possession, to be worked into the system not quite like the multiplication tables and the Lord’s prayer, yet permanently lodged. But the prescription recognizes also the necessity of supplementary reading under slight supervision, and also at least a superficial survey of the broad field of letters. It does not mention the cultivation of a love for literature, nor cultural training, nor equipping the young with an assortment of the high ideals which underlie the greatness of the English speaking peoples, nor art for art’s sake, nor preparation for citizenship, nor Americanization. Don’t think me unmoral or low-minded. I have my visions. But at present I am prescribing elementary fundamentals. Get good literature under the skin, get it into the circulatory system, do what you can to make it bone, fibre, and tis-
March, 1922]  THE VIRGINIA TEACHER 64

sue. Then trust it. I am satisfied if, when I meet a high school graduate, I can feel sure that he is thoroughly acquainted with a few worthy pieces of literature, has read in addition a reasonable number of books, and knows that he has not read all that an intelligent person should.

That you in St. Louis will accept without change my definition of aims is not to be expected; but that you adopt some definition and publish it for all teachers in all grades, all pupils, and all parents to see is, I think, essential. Such a unifying, directive, restrictive force is particularly necessary in these days when there are so many free lances among us.

My next suggestion is that the course of study growing out of this definition be specifically detailed as to minimum essentials, year by year if not term by term, from the first grade through the twelfth. I hate restraint. I hate schedules, time-tables. I like to teach what I like to each, when and how I please. I don't enjoy lock-step. School supervisors will agree that in this respect I am not unique. But to English a citizenship of boys and girls is a big, big twelve-year job, the biggest in the entire field of education. It cannot be handled in hit-or-miss fashion. It cannot be done if those directing the work in the lower grades and those directing the work in the higher grades cannot come to an agreement in regard to the minimum requirements for each year. There must be a consistent twelve-year program, a definite prescription, a united effort. Hard, practical sense tells us that in any large system this must be so.

But note that I am talking about minimum requirements. Individuality must not be unduly curbed. The best that is in the teacher should be allowed to come out. The best that is in the teacher should be allowed to come out. The best that is in the teacher should be allowed to come out. He must be given a wide range; so far as possible he must be free. “Compromise and barter,” Burke reminds us, enter into all human relations. There should be a minimum of necessary restraint, a maximum of liberty. I know of no better plan to recommend than that which is followed in Hartford High School where the printed, fixed requirement in literature and composition is as meager as it is definite, and where, the minimum requirement once met, the instructor becomes a free agent. And I may add that much of the finest work is done by those who employ their freedom in developing a specialty. Every English teacher should be a specialist.

My next suggestion is that in planning the course we adapt it to actual needs growing out of present conditions—make it a practical, workable course even though it may not look well in print. I have in mind two lines of training. Here is the first. We all know that certain matters which, a decade ago, called for but slight attention now demand heroic treatment. Every year, from the fourth or fifth on, we must devote five or ten minutes of nearly every recitation period to habit-forming drill—drill in spelling, in punctuation; in sentence analysis, construction, and manipulation; in the correcting of common errors; in clear interpretation of brief extracts; in planning, thinking. Call it “warming-up” drill, “setting-up” drill, military drill, or what you please. Over and over and over again must we make our pupils do certain elementary things till good habits are established. Such drill, to be effective, should be not only brief and simple enough for duller minds but carefully planned, with a definite prescription for each semester. It should be essentially uniform throughout a city system. With some hesitation I suggest, further, that, no matter how wedded we may be to the socialized recitation, we keep this work in our own hands. We must be the drillmasters. We must drive—crack the whip if necessary—make things go with a snap! Alertness, accuracy, eventually speed: we should try for these things. We should try hard.

The second line of training, more necessary today than a decade ago, is of a more agreeable character. Children of this generation should be read to and talked to. Parallel with the regular prescribed course I think there should be another, informal, shadowy, the teacher taking five or ten minutes once or twice a week to read something that he likes and perhaps talk about it a little—a page or two from a new book, a newspaper story of the better kind, an editorial, a short poem, even a single sentence with a dash of genius in it. There is contagion in this simple procedure. It is a blessing to pupils who are not brilliant yet are receptive. The best teacher I have ever known, no matter by what standards measured, does much of her finest work in this simple way. With her a recitation period is never merely a recitation period; it is a giving time. We
must all be drill masters; present day conditions demand it. But we all need to practice the fine art of giving; for really the poverty of our young is great.

My fourth suggestion is of sterner stuff. If daily assignments are reasonable and specific, so definite that the pupil knows precisely what he is expected to do, let us see that he does it. I would accept every reasonable excuse for non-performance. I would be more than considerate of all who are mentally slow. I would be courteous to all. But really, fellow teachers, it is time that we brought pressure to bear on the lazy, the indifferent, the self-satisfied, the humpious. Let us have done with coaxing and urging and cunningly motivating, and with praising where praise is not deserved. Let us not confuse teaching with entertaining. English is not a study always to be left till all other studies have received attention, nor one to be prepared on the way to class. The English recitation is not a party, nor always a forum where views are expressed without previous thought. In part at least it is a time for hard work based upon preparation. A composition is more than words thrown together hastily; it must bear cargo. A theme spotted with errors—why should we accept it at all? Properly taught, English is the most ethical of all studies. Think of its demoralizing influence if, year after year, we tolerate superficiality and sham and sloppy workmanship. Not long ago I visited a school where the pupils were unusually alert and evidently working hard yet with pleasure. The head of the English department had found a remedy. It was heroic. It had caused a row; but it proved effective. He had failed, in one class, twenty-five per cent. He was applying a second remedy: for each year a taboo list of mistakes which simply must not be made. A single error from the published list failed a composition—reduced it to zero. The lists were brief; they dealt with simple things; but they had to be respected. I do not like such savage remedies. I do not like to use a bludgeon in teaching one of the fine arts. A cracked skull is not easily mended. But neither do I believe in legalizing habits of laziness.

A definite aim, announced, familiar to teacher and pupils and parents; a minimum course of study specifically setting forth the few things which must be done each year; as wide a margin of liberty for the individual teacher as possible, but liberty gained only through doing first what the minimum course prescribes; almost daily drill, simple, brief, sharp, in elements; informal readings and talks by the teacher, his gift graciously bestowed; a sterner insistence that when reasonable tasks are specifically assigned they be done well and promptly: these are the simple suggestions I have come so far to make.

As I review them, they seem absurdly simple suggestions to offer a great city like St. Louis famed for the progressive spirit of her teachers. But they are all that I dare to offer to any city, because of existing conditions: the growing number of school children, the heterogeneous character of these children, the congestion of the curriculum, the multiplicity of demands for time and energy made upon boys and girls by modern society, the fever for experimentation which at times approaches delirium, the new spirit of young America.

This new spirit, so maddening at times, so baffling, yet fascinating even in its frenzy, and containing so much that is fine, is, after all, the most important element in our new problem. I suspect that we must yield to it—a little. I am positive that we must deal firmly with it in all matters that are fundamentally essential. Certainly we must study it, honestly, sympathetically, till we understand it better. Perhaps the challenge it contains is precisely what some of us who are high school instructors need. I wonder, in regard to myself, whether I may not be a little more conservative than I am aware, too fond of yesterday, too suspicious of what is new. I wonder if I cannot, without surrendering anything vital, or cheapening any of the finer things which make the hard life of a teacher of English the most enviable in all the profession, better adapt my instruction to the needs of the rising generation of boys and girls, the men and women of tomorrow. Let me close by repeating that they are unmistakably a fine lot, the best the world has ever produced.

**Alfred M. Hitchcock**

Twenty years ago about $4,000,000 was spent in the United States for the support of normal schools. Last year $25,000,000 was spent for their support.