

SOCIAL ENGLISH

ENGLISH composition has been one of the least interesting subjects taught in the schools. This is largely because the pupil or student was provided with no initial enthusiasm for composing; speaking and writing in the classroom have been formal matters unrelated to his personal need to express or communicate his feelings or ideas. The pupil has been forced to observe the rules and niceties of the English language without being aware in any vital way of their uses to him. The result is that expression through language has been the most formal and artificial of all the school studies. Correct expression does not come as a matter of academic study; it is rather the result of correct daily speaking and writing. One's English is the expression of his language habit. This worth-while habit, a conscious acquirement, is the result of conscious inhibitions and conscious endeavors to master correct procedures. Some few years ago it was customary to assign topics for composition upon which the pupil had no real information. If knowledge was supplied, it was in the form of more words about words. The direct, personal, and vital experience of boys and girls were a resource seldom utilized by the teacher. Now, fortunately, we are asking our boys and girls to write or speak of the things they know in an intimate way.

But to have knowledge does not imply the desire to communicate it. There must be a motive, a stimulation, which creates the desire or the need for speech. The largest single problem with which the teacher has to deal today is that of getting adequate motivation into the composition period.

We have come to realize that the truth expressed by any one is seldom a purely intellectual matter. Ideas are colored by attitudes. This gives them their vivacity, force, or charm. Yet not until recently have we aimed at the development of feelings, as well as ideas, as part of the content

required for speech or writing. The teacher realized that children were more readily enlisted in the recital of their personal experiences, which are always colored by personal attitude.

We must not make the mistake of assuming that training in composition is purely an individual matter. Most self-expression is for the purpose of social communication. We express ourselves in the presence of other people to gain appreciation or stimulation and to influence and control others. Our whole use of language has a social setting. This truth cannot be ignored in any effective accomplishment in the classroom. The futility of much of our past teaching has been due to our mental blindness to the social function of language. One has only to compare the situation of ordinary conversation with that of a class exercise in oral composition to realize how far we have forgotten the social genesis and purpose of speech. Ordinary human beings would not endure hearing the same item of discussion repeated by each person present. Nor would one care to say what every one else has already said. Yet these are some of the striking characteristics of a composition exercise. If we are to make our training real, we must socialize or naturalize our teaching of composition. Nothing is more important to the improvement of results than that we shall use the full psychology of linguistic intercourse in teaching people to talk and write.

Let us begin with children's eager desire to express what interests them. But though the child insists on your listening to his flood of remarks, he does not care enough about their effect to attempt forming any sort of judgment of it. The most absent-minded pretense of heed or assent quite suits him. For developing and socializing this crude activity of children, we find most valuable forces, first, in their curiosity in exploring their surroundings, and second, in their equally keen interest in the live account of other people's experiences, which

they get at second-hand through oral or written accounts. But what is more important, a child's absorption in accounts of others' experiences can be skillfully moulded into truly co-operative work among the children of a group with vigorous but good spirited criticism of one another's results.

In repeating nonsense rhymes, we do not have composition, the child's own presentation of his own ideas. Because we have not always realized that true and living experience is the best source of expressible ideas, we have too often got nothing better than acceptable repetition of phrases. The major interests for a child are happenings full either of action or of interest in "persons"—first in the child himself and next, in the animals and humans about him. Too often have we failed to view this matter from the point of view of the child himself; we have determined what ideas he should have and assigned him those, making our composition material hopelessly abstract and futile.

For example, a class in making a trip to a factory have taken down religiously all that the guide told them of the number of men employed, the length of working day, salaries paid, output of certain departments, and the like, and have copied it cheerfully into themes—to the neglect, in the space they could give to the subject, of what they themselves observed and realized and could express in their own way; how the wood pulp was brought in to the grinders, how the rags were mixed and the acid applied and how the material was rolled out into long sheets. Their usual restatement of quite lifeless facts is in no real sense composition work.

There may be many ideas which a child quite thoroughly realizes and in which he is deeply interested. Nevertheless, it may arouse no impulse toward verbal expression. Nothing should be called for in speech or in writing which naturally demands no expression, or which can better be expressed in some other way. In the early grades, certainly, subjects without action—description of things, places, people not

doing something—can be best handled in drawing or modeling or else let alone; at least below the high school, subjects expressible in time order are probably always preferable. Mr. Chubb's idea was "that children should write about things seen, rather than felt." There are unquestionably many deep impressions, from pictures such as the "Sistine Madonna" or the "Song of the Lark," for instance, or from stories with an ideal not badly stated but illustrated well, which we had better not analyze and force to expression.

This is a suggested grouping about centers of typical interests: (1) hearing or reading stories; (2) plays and games; (3) construction or hand work; and (4) careful observation of human and other activities or their realization from other people's accounts.

From the child's acquaintance with stories, he has a great fund of imaginative material at his command. Thus is developed his fanciful self-nature. Stories are not handled to the best end if they do not also help make him see the common things all about him as more truly interesting than before—full of mysteries, and of people just as worth while, as prince or starveling of the fairy books. These stories are sources of many subjects and of motives of expression.

The second and third typical interests to be noted are children's zeal in games and in handiwork and construction of many sorts. If the school but gives occasion for these vivid and living interests to express themselves, we may here gain a starting-ground of free and vigorous expression upon which to develop composition power.

The fourth type of child-activity to be considered begins with observing the activities of home and community and such nature processes as the ways of birds and insects. Group and individual expeditions for the purpose to discuss and come to understand a thing are valuable, provided only, the child does not simply repeat what he is

told by workmen and others, but succeeds in relating in his own way what he has understood.

There soon appears the problem of helping children handle matters which they cannot themselves observe, but which they must come to know about if we would get them beyond the circle of their small immediate horizon.

We should vivify his ideas by illustrating, showing pictures, constructing, studying several accounts of any matter, making the recitation or theme a composite report of these sources.

The child's expression may be helped to remain always his own—his story an outgrowth of his individual experience. We may test the value of any composition by the question: Does the child express his idea in a way to show the action of his own sense and mind upon it? Children naturally use the wording of their source of information. Is the healthy crudity of his blunt and inexact child-mind—his raw expression and the stale phrases borrowed here and there—often incongruously mixed with the finer and more precise wording he has just adopted? If so, the chance is that he has recast and fused what he has newly learned with previous experience, and so made it quite his own.

It is essential always, both in oral and written themes, that the pupils credit as accurately as they can the source of their statements. A child may say, "This is what old Mr. Jones told me about when there were Indians around here," or "I found this in *Montgomery's History*." By thus making quite unmistakable the sources of facts or opinions he cites, a child can make possible for himself and for his readers a fair rating of new ideas. Thus children can establish the basis for habits of accuracy and honesty in thinking. Pupils may come to understand and develop the scientific doubt which is essential to real training in thought. They will be spurred by other pupils' challenge to examine more carefully the bases of fact

statements they have heard or read; particularly they will be assured of the difference between observed facts and mere opinions which are not backed with so much specific statement of concrete instances as makes conclusion from it safe.

As a third point, we must lead the class to demand always that each child adapt what he presents specifically to their understanding; that is, to test one's own expression for its actual clearness and force to those he intends it for. He may not be permitted to use technical terms without making clear to his audience just what they are. Not nearly enough is made of this, the crux and central principle of a social teaching of composition.

There seems to be no justification for assigning as composition subjects—whatever their importance in other school work—sterile, dry matter that does not represent to the child realized and vital experience. Realization is the fundamental test for both selection and presentation of material. Thus we can hope to develop in children first, power of distinguishing, in what they hear and read, between statements of fact and statements of opinion; and second, some true sense of their respective values.

We may classify the vital motives and projects for composition into these three classes: (1) "The Story Teller or Entertainer Motive" which apparently grows from the child's desire to rehearse his own exploits and real or fanciful adventures. A child finds that his effective telling of a story gives him standing in his small community. This genuine pleasure in holding the attention of others and gaining their commendation has tremendous potentiality in the composition class. Their demand that the speaker make his picture and other sense—appeals clear and real experiences, once this is developed under skillful direction, stirs up an eager desire to transfer his experiences and his fancies into just as real ideas for his classmates.

The story types should be real and fanci-

ful adventures. The sort of stories whose basis is actual happenings may, under the urge of social demand, stimulate the children to note in some detail interesting sights and sounds and odors in picnics and walks to and from school, and so on, to see more color and form and movement, and to gather the most possible of characteristic human detail. This may lead children to avoid meaningless conventional assumptions based on face or dress merely and establish the value of careful observation of what people do and say.

(2) The Teacher Motive. The child's interest in telling about what he can do or make is at first no different from the story motive. But give him as audience some one who really wants to know about the process, and we may transform his conception completely. He must now serve a practical purpose; a new element has entered into his calculations. For instance, one sixth grade boy explained the process of making a kite—in a vigorous, straightforward manner, but without helpful and definite detail. The boy was asked to repeat certain parts of his directions more slowly so Ellen could try them out. The boy was a little contemptuous of Ellen's failure, but the other boys saw the point and were eager to clear up the confusion. The teacher rightly gave the boy the chance to make his own adjustments, and he succeeded in doing it. It is through such experiment and betterment with the help of real and practical criticism that the significant interest in expression comes. Just so far as the child has done or observed interesting things that he thinks he can make practically clear to his classmates, these themes have a very solid hold on his interest.

(3) "The Community-Worker" Motive. The project readily initiated in a social class which demands the common action of the group for carrying them out is socially more valuable than the others. These require of the child the utmost in effective expression to make clear the details of a plan

which he has worked on because he considers it important to the group and which he presents to them for judgment. To be successful, it must command the sympathetic understanding of his "age-fellows" and enlist co-operation. These "community workers" topics grow out of the observations, discussions, and activities that center around group or neighborhood needs. All this should be of the greatest value. To get the co-operation of his class group and of other people in solving the problems he attempts, a child must explain very clearly the facts he has noted which have led him to desire something done, and he must present them so vividly as to win assent and action. He must also be able to work with others and value their contributions, thus use the thinking of the children and their power of expression to meet actual social problems.

We may have differentiated a fourth type of motive of expression if it did not overlap and include much of the last two mentioned. A great deal of what the child has to explain or discuss from his interests both as teacher and as community worker is not statement of observed facts, but presentation of his original opinions or of opinions he has seen reason to adopt. We as teachers need to help him and his friends toward seeing just where opinions enter. They need to know that these are not facts, but their individual conclusions. A child's presentation of opinions is often merely explanation of his position—making it quite clear. When he meets differences of opinion, explanation automatically becomes argument. Formal and thorough study of what constitutes effective argument must come in more adult classes designed to teach these things, but children can certainly gain very practical hints on the subject in the sturdy give-and-take of a fairly umpired social classroom.

All of these motives may lead to delightful possibilities of talking and writing for other audiences than the social class group, and thus are found still more new and fas-

cinating motives. The possibilities of this work, real and imaginary, are so numerous that there should be little reason for working over much in one type, with resultant narrowed interests and limited expressional development.

And there seems less excuse for themes arbitrarily demanded, or for ill-tasting assignments of assumed motives.

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THE VETERAN FROM VIRGINIA

In the November issue of the *Journal of the National Education Association* appeared the following article from the pen of Cornelius J. Heatwole, Secretary of the Virginia State Teachers Association. Mr. Glass was later honored at the recent educational conference in Norfolk by a testimonial dinner.

E. C. GLASS, superintendent of schools of Lynchburg, Virginia, has served the longest term of any school superintendent in the United States, having held that position in his home town for forty-seven years. He has been connected with the school system of the city of his birth for fifty-four years. He was teaching in a two-room wooden building in 1871, the second year of the life of Virginia's State public school system and has, therefore, served under every State superintendent of public instruction in the State. There is no other person now living in Virginia who enjoys such a purview of our educational progress, and we doubt that there is another instance in the United States where a man can point to a highly efficient school system and say, "Here is the work of my hands."

Mr. Glass received his early training in the private schools of Lynchburg. He later attended the Norwood School for Boys, a private secondary school. This is the extent of his formal academic training. However, he has been a diligent student of education throughout his long experience as

teacher and school administrator, keeping apace with the advancing educational thought during his long years of service. In this country he has visited and studied the schools of Boston, Quincy, Brookline, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, and Chicago; in England the schools of London, Liverpool, and Chester; and in Scotland, Glasgow and Edinburg. He made the first arrangement for an international exchange of teachers, and the Lynchburg High School was for three years benefited by the teaching of Miss M. G. Rottray, of the English schools. Mr. Glass carved out his own educational philosophy. No person or institution had a part in determining his educational thought and practice.

Mr. Glass was intimately connected with all the progressive movements in Virginia as well as those of the country at large. He was a member of the first State Board of Education in Virginia. He enjoyed a wide acquaintance with the leading men and women of this country, many of whom he was instrumental in bringing to Virginia as members of the faculty of the notable summer school of methods conducted by him and his associate, Willis A. Jenkins, from 1889 to 1904. This school of methods was one of Mr. Glass's outstanding contributions to the progress of education in the State. It was the pioneer agency in Virginia in disseminating scientific pedagogy. Here was begun the work of professionalizing education in the State. It was during the session of this school that a Virginia State Teachers Association was inaugurated. Thus began the work of an organized teaching force in Virginia which has developed into such a powerful educational factor. The growth in attendance of the school of methods measures its popularity. From 425 in 1889, it increased to 710 in 1904. At this time, it will be remembered, it was an unusual occurrence for more than a few hundred educators to assemble voluntarily for the discussion of educational problems. State normal schools