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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Kenneth VanderMeulen

“No amount of teacher instruction is adequate unless it increases the pupil’s ability to learn by himself. A world of difference exists between learning to be taught and learning how to learn by yourself. There has been too little concern with developing youngsters to learn by themselves.”

Dr. Arthur I. Gates

Educational Summary, January 20, '57

The following thought is frequently expressed by secondary teachers in schools across the country, whether couched in these terms or others—“My students can’t or won’t study; I seem always to end up having to give the material to them in class.” The problem of study is frustrating to teachers to the degree that they expect real results evidenced in classwork. We should like to attempt a description of at least one means of facilitating study and an improved attitude toward it.

One of the shortcomings in a consideration of the idea of *study* is the fact that it is defined in various ways in the minds of various teachers. The weakest notion of the word would be demonstrated in a teacher’s assignment that said “study the next ten pages for tomorrow” and said nothing else. In all likelihood, students would understand it to mean *read* the pages mentioned. An assignment which means “a process involving the acquisition of knowledge” from these pages would have to be accompanied by a guidesheet to point out the expected learnings and the supporting data. Therefore, when we set out to discuss study-skills, we must agree on what we mean to have the students acquire. An assumption may be made here that most teachers would expect their students to gain mastery over a particular limited body of knowledge, including understanding and the ability to utilize the material in a larger frame of reference.

Following the assignment and dismissal from class, the student decides to begin work on his text. As the teacher, you need to be aware of these three aspects of study as a means of succeeding. Students in your subject area can pass your course with good-to-excellent grades if they have developed and refined (1) their purpose for reading, (2) their ability to concentrate, and (3) their system for retention. These three concepts are not limited to any academic level or area; we discuss them because they are the means for all of us

to grow toward our potential. They embody the important idea of helping students to *learn how to learn*.

READING FOR A PURPOSE

When the student chooses to work on the reading and study assignment for your course, he needs to have a purpose for doing so. What purpose the student feels he is serving in beginning to read is an important consideration here. As most teachers know, the *purpose* for reading cannot well be applied externally. It must come from the motivation of the student and the interest he has built in the subject. Nevertheless, it is possible and worthwhile for the teacher to pique the curiosity of the students and help to stimulate a certain amount of initial interest. While the teacher may assume he has produced the necessary incentive by announcing the assignment, he needs to be sensitive to reactions. Many times, when we see that initial interest is lacking, we are tempted closer and closer to the pitfall of using grades as the means of creating an artificial *purpose* for reading. And oftentimes, because the teacher is naturally interested in this field of study in which he has specialized, he slides very easily into the habit of exhorting his students to recognize the great importance of the subject. Such approaches, however, seldom bring dividends in proportion to the energy expended.

At this point we might suggest a conversation with students on the whole matter of *why* and *how* they learn. *What* they learn is usually a vital issue with the teacher, but until students can be led to see the wisdom and logic of *why* and *how*, the very foundation itself is incomplete.

Evoking the response from students that "education is important" is not very difficult. Where the teacher's abilities are tested is in helping each student to relate his own personal goals to the subject of the course. Students can see the "sense" of reading and studying assignments which are in some way associated with their own future careers, their welfare, or their very survival. Notice, for instance, the success of certain areas of science and social studies in high schools during the last few years—the certain areas being ecology and population problems—because they so obviously deal with our tenuous physical existence.

On a less momentous level, students may be helped to develop purpose in reading by the stimulation of our natural need to discover and explore. The teacher can see threads of ideas started at one point in the text and woven into the larger frame of reference through the

remainder of the book. It is essential that students be encouraged to seek out these subtle hints, to explore other sources for related ideas, and to contribute their "finds" on their own level of comprehension. The role of the teacher can only be to stimulate, to act as catalyst to the whole process. The purpose-for-reading is required for effective study, but it cannot be forced.

BETTER CONCENTRATION

Another area in which improvement in study can be facilitated is the actual process of reading, understanding, reflecting on, and integrating the ideas expressed by the author. When this procedure falters, the weak link in the chain is most frequently found to be an inability to sustain *concentration*. The teacher should try to avoid letting this aspect become a technical "bete noir" for which there is no adequate solution. Concentration is merely another facet of study which requires a good deal of understanding and sense. Lessons on how to learn to concentrate should probably be preceded by a typical class "gripe" session. Sessions like this do not have to be structured by the teacher; students are always waiting for this opportunity. As the teacher, you have heard it all before, but you let the group verbalize on the subject. "This stuff is boring." "What good is it to know about this?" "I can't keep my mind on it." And that is the psychological moment for the teacher to offer the chance to learn *concentration*. As scarce a commodity as concentration is in this land full of loud noises and flashing lights, it *can* be acquired and improved.

The ability to focus one's mind on a reading assignment requires both understanding and control of the inner and external distractions. The secondary student does not have to know all the physical, psychological, and environmental factors which may influence his ability to keep his mind on his reading. He does need to give himself a distraction-analysis test. As his teacher, you may want to give yourself such a test in advance, so that you have shared the experience. Simply keep a pad and pencil with you as you begin reading a large technical book that is out of your specific area of interest. Every time your mind wanders from the ideas presented in the text, stop and note briefly what the distraction was.

As a successful student of a field of study, and a mature person, you naturally would not have a large list to analyze. Your students, on the other hand, might amass a list of a few dozen distractions in a matter of ten pages. Practice at checking the list for certain outstanding evidence (example of physical distractions—aches, hunger,

dizziness, etc.) or a pattern of emotional distractions will help a student begin to recognize his habits of thought in a more objective manner than before.

A single suggestion to the teacher who applies this method with his class; don't be too serious and formal. Be constructive, try to use the light touch, and avoid the resentment that results from too officious an approach. In other words, it is better to suggest it than assign it.

METHODS FOR IMPROVING RETENTION

One more part of the studying procedure that deserves consideration is the means of *retaining* what is important in the reading assignment. Regarded in a mechanical sense, it is remembering and being able to recall the central thoughts and some of the ideas which form the structure of expository work. While it is not always fashionable to use the word "remembering" because it smacks of rote learning, we can agree that our definition of memory includes understanding and the ability to recall by meaningful associations. The degree to which retention can be successful, of course, is related to how well the student established his purpose for reading and how well he sustained his concentration.

In the various study formulas presented by study counselors and reading teachers, this step concerned with retaining knowledge for future reference and application is regarded as crucial. The teacher's role in this step is often obscured by the tradition that students tend to work to remember material only for success on evaluation tests. Books on study methods emphasize certain approaches which the teacher might demonstrate in class. Some formulas suggest that students restate key ideas from the text in their own words. Others stress that making sure of mastery requires explaining or teaching the ideas to others. Still others state that listing important questions from the assigned reading and their answers on opposite sides of 3 x 5 cards will help ensure mastery and retention of the materials. The teacher might encourage various methods for reviewing (underlining the text, coding the margins) so that students will begin to form and follow the particular system that best suits them.

Formulas alone, as well conceived as they may be, are not sufficient to bring about changes in student behavior, as all experienced teachers realize. However, if students are informed of some systems of study that have worked for a number of excellent students through decades of application, they will doubtless see certain rays of hope for organizing their own practices for efficiency.

Therefore, if high school students in your classroom are to gain real and lasting benefit from the *retention* step in doing their assignments, they will need your guidance in *learning how to learn* for your subject. And because you have succeeded as a student in that subject, and you probably systematized your study—you are the logical mentor to demonstrate means of gaining what is important from the pages of the text. Take some time to think about the manner in which you gained mastery over your special subject, and a few examples of the methods you employed may bring valuable results in the student approach. To avoid confusion of personality with method in the minds of the students, it may be best to show the “successful student’s” means of mastering the *retention* step in study rather than “this is the way I do it.” After all, popularity is not the major consideration. If you helped the students find purpose in reading and helped them to understand and control the inner and external distractions, their improvement in more effective study and retention will be observable and measurable.