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TEACHING READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Reading as a Catalyst to Creativity

Kenneth VanderMeulen

Recently, a report of an accrediting inspection team in Illinois contained this ironic statement (adapted here): Teachers in this high school tend to be so highly specialized in their disciplines that they have moved from the affective domain to the cognitive domain almost exclusively, thereby vitiating their educational endeavors. This article sees the establishment of habits of reading for pleasure as a means of avoiding such criticism of our schools, and as a direct means of building upon an elusive quality called *creativity*.

Every high school teacher who thinks about improving the means of educating his students is painfully aware of the welter of books and articles about the so-called plight of the secondary schools. Scarcely a day passes that doesn't include someone's charge that American high schools are failing the youth of today, and hardly a week goes by that doesn't mark the publishing of a new book on how to rearrange the high schools to make them more "efficient" purveyors of information. Naturally, in this age of technology, machines of all sorts are being suggested by the blue-print dreamers for tomorrow's education. With each charge against the school, with each "efficiency" salesman's pitch, the implication becomes stronger that teachers are simply disseminators of information and high school students are merely receptacles. If the public continues to read and accept these premises as a basis for altering the schools, there is a possibility that we will see a de-personalizing and dehumanizing of the entire secondary educational system.

It is the purpose of this article to look at needs for the high school graduates in tomorrow's society, see the role of reading in helping to satisfy those needs, and point out a few of the means to those ends which can be employed by every secondary teacher. It may be stated that an ancillary purpose of this paper is to repudiate the many proposals that we turn high schools around and inside-out with a profusion of administrative reorganizations. Education is still the high calling of a professional teacher helping a young person to discover himself and to recognize his own infinite potential for great contributions toward the perfectability of man.

We may begin by recognizing the importance of reading in this whole picture. There is no more central or effective method of helping young people grow than through reading. Equally important, once the students have learned to read ideas, is not only *what* they read, but what they are *reading for*—what they are reading to become. Certainly, it must be seen, the student who is truly reading is thinking, and thinking is growth of the mind. We must ask, then, what do we want our students to become?

We have to pay particular attention to the process of reading and its results at the secondary level for at least a few reasons. Through early and later elementary grades, teachers generally accept the idea that students are learning how to read better, refining the process of reading for personal development. The youngsters read everything in a narrative vein, they become involved, and reflect with teachers on what it all means. Yet, somewhere before or during secondary reading—experts differ on the point of change—students tend to lose the habit of recreational reading. They forego the pleasure of reading stories they used to enjoy, simply because the pressure of reading for information has supplanted reading for the fun of it.

We want to see how (and whether) what the student has read has meshed with his own mental content to create a new amalgam of ideas as a unique contribution to the world of thought. Since reading is a personal and solitary pursuit which high school teachers hesitate to analyze aloud in each student's case, trying to find out what is going on in a student's mind as he reads becomes a massive guessing game. The results are evident in the rash of group reading tests. Yet what do we really want to know?

According to the studies and recommendations of the past two decades, *creative talent* is currently and will continue to be the most pressing need of all our essential human resources. As teachers, we must consider the term *creativity* with extreme care, for we are in the strategic position of being able to capitalize on it, or crush it, depending on what we do, how we view the concept, and what role we project for ourselves.

Creative talent, says Carl Rogers, grows out of the “novelty of the situation and the uniqueness of the individual.” Maw and Maw, in *The Reading Teacher*, January, 1962, believe that creativity is seen best in the persistence of student questions and investigations. Other ways of defining or recognizing creativity include such words as non-conforming behavior, perceptiveness of relationships, imagination,

originality, and others. One study, for instance, shows us that creativity is much more a matter of potentials being unfolded or developed than being an inborn trait or gift. (D. W. MacKinnon, "The Nature and Nurture of Creative Talent," *American Psychologist*, No. 17, 1962).

A large part of the problem also is the fact that the word creativity is too limited a concept in the minds of many. Teachers frequently have the denotation and connotation for creativity which confine the whole idea to the fields of artistic creation, and fail to see its importance in every area of human endeavor. It is precisely that kind of limited thinking which makes us agree with the poet John Ciardi in saying that creativeness is a gift and can't be taught. This would be a similar error to using the strict dictionary definition—"having or showing power to do original work"—simply because one may be too easily misled into regarding inventiveness and creativity as a gift. We must begin at once to avoid thinking about the creative impulse as if it were some mysterious power bestowed on certain selected children by unfathomable forces.

The practical way to look at creativity might be—in the larger sense of seeing the idea—that it is the process of becoming; that is, the job each person does of making what he can of himself. Creating in this way is never quite complete, and we as teachers have a hand in the crucial matter of helping adolescents develop their creative talents through reading. Nor do we need to conduct searches and administer competitive aptitude tests to seek out the creative students. We are not hunting for "gifted" young people whose parents want to hear about their phenomenally high native intelligence. We are teaching in ways that will help to bring out all creative talent wherever and in whatever degree it exists, and make it bloom.

The assumption can thus be made that all students have *some* degree of creativity, albeit hidden deep in some cases and manifesting itself in maverick tendencies in other cases. If the teacher believes in the importance of creativity for the society of tomorrow, accepting the idea that in the process of teaching some traditions must occasionally be bent, then that teacher's efforts should lean toward finding materials which will encourage creativity to grow and flourish.

Reading materials should be chosen for their power to draw the student into real-life situations, to raise the level of excitement within the student's mind to the point of quickening his physical responses. While reading for information in various content areas may draw on several reading skills in different proportions, reading fictional literary

art is aimed primarily at the feelings and emotional involvement of the student.

It is with this objective in mind that the teacher of any secondary subject area should select pleasurable, easy-to-read materials to make available in the classroom. Imagination, suspense, emotion, and appeal to the senses need not be confined to the reading of literature in the high school English classes. If we remind ourselves that most of the faults found with our high schools by their graduates pertained to the general notion that they are “dullsville,” we can easily see the potential gain through heightened personal involvement in exciting experiences of fictional characters. Literary art has value for developing creativity because of the uses of devices that rouse and stimulate imagery. Every metaphor and symbol that raise the level of awareness in the reader bring the experiences closer to reality. The reflection on the memories that follows each such vicarious experience is the essence of its true value, and may produce students who thus bring their extended scope of living to all future situations both real and simulated.

Lest the reader draw an inference that this paper proposes total substitution of “stories” for the study of math and science and social science, let us review the steps that brought us to our present stand. First, with the advent of the knowledge explosion concept, many administrators and conscientious high school teachers began thinking in terms of getting more information to more students in a limited time. The current tendency to take performance contracting and speed reading seriously is ample evidence of the impact of what I would call crash-teaching. Second, the increasing emphasis on “efficient” imparting and organizing of informative materials has tended to neglect what the Rockefeller Brothers’ Report in *The Pursuit of Excellence* called our greatest national resource—creative talent. Third, the human influence, the personal relationship of the teacher to the student, and the *living-through-feelings* that each student does in his reading constitute the increased sensitivity which is needed to stimulate originality and creativity.

Therefore, we would seriously suggest that every teacher find ways of bringing personal, emotional involvement through literature into every classroom. The typing student will learn typing through practice, and will gain something more if that practice includes copying lines from other sources than the inevitable workbook; “archie and mehital-bel” can offer more than “The quick red fox . . .”

The student in history will accompany a real fictional person

through an episode of history, Lewis and Clark, Andrew Jackson—and will live more through *feelings* about that historical movement than can be derived from five pages of lecture notes. *Johnny Tremain*, by Esther Forbes, for example, has given youngsters more emotional flavor of the Revolutionary War than many well documented texts.

Reading in science materials has become regarded as an increasingly serious problem by teachers of biology. It would be less a problem if *human* scientists were introduced through fiction, biographies, and descriptions of dramatic scientific events such as Paul De Kruif popularized. One example may serve. It is thought efficient to teach scientific method by having students learn the six steps, from “define your problem” to “test your hypothesis.” However, as many teachers will agree, students tend to remember the items in their notebooks only long enough to pass the tests. To the degree that this occurs, the teaching efforts are wasted. If a fictional character, one for whom adolescent students can feel some warmth, were suddenly plunged into a suspenseful situation from which extrication can occur only if the six steps mentioned are followed, the students’ recollection of scientific method might well become a permanent part of their mental content. If the science teacher is not inclined to browse through the school library in search of such catalytic literature, he might send 75c to Signet Books to receive Hilary Deason’s recently revised *A Guide to Scientific Reading*, which is an annotated bibliography of 1300 paperbacks recommended by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Each classroom in the high school should have its small circulating library of magazines, poetry collections, paperbacks, and newspaper files—the ultimate goal always being to put persons and feelings and imagination back into reading for true education.