

On Teaching and on Being Taught

The other day I happened upon an article which attempted to prove that as soon as a child begins to be taught its mind ceases to function. Naturally, the further it progresses along the road of education the more atrophied become its thinking powers. The thesis has much to be said for it, as you will readily agree. Without going into the matter further, however, suffice it to be said that like Huckleberry Finn I found "the statements was interesting but tough." It served the purpose of setting the machinery of my mind creaking into motion. The question arose before me, 'How much should the teacher do, and how should he do it?' Of course the next question to arise was, 'How much should the pupil do, and how should he do it?'

Like most questions that occur to us, we can go back to Plato and Aristotle and find there a treatment of them. Plato held the strange theory that no knowledge can come to the soul through the senses; the soul has within itself all knowledge. All it has to do is search around and find it. A long lecture on English or Philosophy is useless. Since no knowledge can come through the senses the teacher might as well endeavour to cram a book or a few written pages through the ears of his students as talk to them in this way. (Plato was a teacher, and possibly he was speaking from bitter experience). Each man has all knowledge within him. It is impossible to pour any into him. He must do all the work himself. It is a question of searching for himself. Another may help by a judicious question here and there. When a man is turning things over in his mind, he may make mistakes, overlook some points, or think he sees something that is not there. An opportune question will make him take another look. This is the work that the teacher is supposed to do. The question and answer method is the only possible way of teaching or learning. Children should not be given information to be remembered. By prudent questioning they should be taught to think. This Platonic doctrine, that knowledge is the production of the one who comes to know, is the doctrine taught at most normal schools today. We meet evidences of it every day in statements like "every man should do his own thinking," and "educating the people to think for themselves." Of course a

serious difficulty arises here—if no knowledge can come through the senses, how can the question itself come in? It is a difficulty which I cheerfully pass over in order that I may now call the spirit of Aristotle from the vasty deep.

Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, and like all intelligent pupils he disagreed with his teacher on almost everything, even on the question as to how he should be taught. Without going into detail, let us just note that Aristotle said that *all* knowledge comes through the senses, and it could not come in any other way. Consequently, the more facts you drill into your pupil the better the teacher you will be.

The proper path, it seems to me, lies between these two extremes. Most students have an active and a passive capacity. Either or both of these sides may be developed, depending upon the teacher (and of course the pupil). In Geometry, for example, a teacher may confine himself to a demonstration of the regular propositions. In such a case the students may learn the propositions and gain a thorough grasp of them. Most students, with good training, can learn the propositions in Geometry. They could never, however, learn to work deductions; even the best of them would be at a loss if given a proposition other than the ones he has already learned. Another way of teaching Geometry is to train the class from the beginning in doing deductions. The student is here thrown upon his own resources. He is not a mere passive recipient of the teacher's explanation. He must think out the problem for himself.

In subjects like English and Philosophy (I link the two together because almost every writer of classic English was a philosopher) the role of passive recipient on the part of the student is much more limited than in Geometry. There is very little as clear-cut and final in either of these subjects as the part propositions play in Geometry. In other words, English and Philosophy is nearly all thinking, as opposed to remembering. If the student merely listens to his beloved professor, he will never, never, know any English or Philosophy.

There are three ways of studying any writer—poet, essayist, or philosopher. The first of these, and the best way, is to study the works of the man himself. This is much more feasible in English than in Philosophy and, indeed, it is the course usually pursued. Obviously,

when we are attempting to interpret a man's thoughts, the best person to tell us what he means is himself. Since, however, we so seldom pay any attention to what a man says until he is dead, we usually find, when it is too late, that his words are capable of many meanings, and we are obliged to interpret them without his help. Besides this, many of these men wrote voluminously in strange tongues, and to attempt to read them as they are, is, in our young lives, out of the question.

A second way of learning what these men thought is through the lecture of the professor.

A third way is by the student reading books that have been written about these men,—analyses of the various characters in Shakespeare, studies of the poetry of Keats or Wordsworth, expositions of the doctrines of Carlyle or Ruskin, histories of philosophy, and so on. These books, all of them, have been written by scholars foremost in their field. They are usually the most learned men in the world in their subject. They are presumably the most capable in the world of making clear to others the thought of the man they are writing about. The average professor can do no more than chart out a safe path for his students through the rocks and shoals of scholarship. The real work should be done by the student outside the class, through his extra reading, through the questions he asks himself, and the efforts he makes to solve those questions for himself.

It is hard to overstress the importance of this outside reading. The student can gain immeasurably more from a careful reading of the mature conclusions of very learned men than he can out of lectures. For one thing, the student is usually able to concentrate to better effect in the solitude and quiet of his own room; for another, these men know much more in their specialized fields than the professor can ever lay claim to; if he did know as much, he would be writing his own books, leaving the task of teaching to less favoured individuals.

It may be objected that the average class cannot understand a book, no matter how well written. If a student cannot understand a book on English or Philosophy during his course, will he ever understand one? It is the business of the student to learn how to read those books while he is taking the course, and if he doesn't, either it isn't much of a course, or he isn't much of a student.

Again it may be objected that a student, when he meets a difficulty, cannot question a book; he can question a teacher. Very true; but as a matter of fact, whether he meets difficulties or not, he doesn't ask questions; at least most of the students I have ever met apparently never meet difficulties.

If the student cannot read books written by men indefinitely better than their teachers, they stand little chance of learning very much. They are in the position of the Geometry class which studies nothing but propositions with the additional misfortune that there are hardly any propositions outside of Geometry. The student in English should be like the student doing deductions in Geometry. He should be trying to understand. He should not sit like a test-tube waiting to be filled; he should not be merely a passive recipient; he should be trying, working, wrestling with difficulties, ever on his own resources, overcoming the obstacles he meets. He should not run with his fist in his eye to his teacher as soon as he meets a sentence that he does not understand, although of course even this one is better than one who doesn't meet any difficulties at all.

In all this I am thinking of the general run of classes, both teachers and students. I leave room for the rare teacher who can by flowing eloquence, and burning zeal, fire the soul of a listener with the divine flame of love of knowledge; and once a proper subject has that flame kindled in his bosom, he has no further need of books or teachers. He is a philosopher!

I leave room for another exception. The first is very rare. This one is much rarer. He is so rare that Plato is undoubtedly right when he says that such a one is reserved to mankind only by the special gift of God's grace. He is the student who can become a philosopher in spite of his teachers!

—D. J. S.



There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

—*Shakespeare.*