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# THE RECITATION

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

TEACHERS are not always clear as to what they mean when they speak of the recitation. Many different meanings are associated with the term. Some of these are suggestive but quite vague; and others, although more definite, are but partial truths that hinder as much as they help. It is not surprising that a confused usage of the term is current among teachers.

From one point of view, the recitation is a recitation-period, a segment of the daily time schedule. In this sense it is an administrative unit, valuable in apportioning to each school subject its part of the time devoted to the curriculum. Thus, we speak of five recitations in arithmetic, three in music, or two in drawing, having in mind merely the number of times the class meets for instruction in a particular school study. A recitation here means no more than a class-period, a more or less arbitrary device for controlling the teacher's and pupils' distribution of energy among the various subjects taught.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

From another point of view, the recitation is a form of educative activity rather than a mere time allotment. In this sense the recitation is a process of instruction, a mode of teaching, wherein pupils and teacher, facing a common situation, proceed toward a more or less conscious end. It is a distinct movement in classroom experience, so organized that a definite beginning, progression, and end are clearly distinguishable. Thus we speak of the method of the recitation, the five formal steps of the recitation, or the various types of recitation. Such a usage makes "recitation" synonymous with "lesson." Indeed, when we pass from general pedagogical discussion to a detailed treatment of special methods of teaching, we usually abandon the term "recitation" and use the word "lesson." Although there is always some notion of a time-period in the curriculum in our idea of a lesson, yet the term "lesson" is more intimately connected with the thought of a teaching exercise in which ideas are developed and fixed in memory. It is through the lesson or recitation that pupils and teachers influence one another's

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

thought and action; and when this condition exists, there is always educative activity.

These two ways of thinking of the recitation, one primarily administrative and the other primarily educative, need to be somewhat sharply differentiated in our thinking. However closely related they are in actual schoolroom work, however greatly they influence each other in practice, they require a theoretic separation. Only by this method can we avoid some of the error and confusion current in teaching theory and practice. A single instance will suffice to show the value of the distinction.

No one of us would deliberately assume that the teaching process required for the instruction of a child would just cover the twenty, thirty, or forty minutes allotted to the class-period, day after day and year after year, regardless of the subject presented or the child taught. Yet this is precisely the sort of assumption that is implied throughout a considerable portion of our current discussion of the teaching process. We talk about a "developmental-lesson" or a "review-recitation" in, say, geography, as though it began

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

and ended with the recitation-period of the day. The daily lesson-plans we demand of apprentice-teachers in training-schools are largely built upon this basis.

Of course the fact that one must begin a theme at a given moment and close at a similar arbitrary point affects the teacher's procedure somewhat. He will always have to attack the problem anew at ten o'clock and pull together the loose ends of discussion at ten-thirty, if these happen to be the limits of time assigned him. But who will be bold enough to assert that the psychological movement for the development and solution of the particular problem at hand will always be exactly thirty minutes long? It is possible, and quite probable, that the typical movements in instruction — development, drill, examination, practice, and review — may occur within a single class-period, following fast upon the heels of each other as the situation may demand. It is equally probable that in many cases any one of them may reach across several class-periods. We need a more flexible way of thinking of the recitation and of the teaching activities involved in

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

class-periods and of other administrative factors which condition the effectiveness of teaching.

Such a clear, flexible treatment of the recitation is offered in this volume. We feel that it will be particularly welcome to the practical teacher since so many previous treatments of this subject have been formal or obscure. Combining the training of a psychologist with the experience of a class teacher, Professor Betts has given us a lucid, helpful, and common-sense treatment of the recitation without falling into scientific technicality or pedagogical formalism.

## CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION . . . . .	v
I. THE PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION . . . . .	1
II. THE METHOD OF THE RECITATION . . . . .	27
III. THE ART OF QUESTIONING . . . . .	53
IV. CONDITIONS NECESSARY TO A GOOD RECITATION . . . . .	79
V. THE ASSIGNMENT OF THE LESSON . . . . .	105
OUTLINE . . . . .	119



# I

## THE PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION

THE teacher has two great functions in the school ; one is that of organizing and managing, the other, that of teaching.

In the first capacity he forms the school into its proper divisions or classes, arranges the programme of daily recitations and other exercises, provides for calling and dismissing classes, passing into and out of the room, etc., and controls the conduct of the pupils ; that is, keeps order.

The organization and management of the school is of the highest importance, and fundamental to everything else that goes on in the school. A large proportion of the teachers who are looked upon as unsuccessful fail at this point. Probably at least two out of three who lose their positions are dropped from inability to organize and manage a school. While this is true, how-

## THE RECITATION

ever, the organizing and managing of the school is wholly secondary; it exists only that the *teaching* may go on. Teaching is, after all, the primary thing. Lacking good teaching, no amount of good management or organization can redeem the school.

### I. *The teacher and the recitation*

Teaching goes on chiefly in what we call the *recitation*. This is the teacher's point of contact with his pupils; here he meets them face to face and mind to mind; here he succeeds or fails in his function of teaching.

Failure in teaching is harder to measure than failure in organization and management. It quickly becomes noised abroad if the children are not well classified, or if the teacher cannot keep order. If the machinery of the school does not run smoothly, its creaking soon attracts public attention, and the skill of the teacher is at once called into question. But the teacher may be doing indifferent work in the recitation, and the class hardly be aware of it and the patrons know nothing about it. There is no definite measure

## PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION

for the amount of inspiration a teacher is giving daily to his pupils, and no foot-rule with which to test the worth of his instruction in the recitation.

And it is this very fact that makes it so necessary that the teacher should study the principles of teaching as applied to the recitation. The difficulty of accurately measuring failure in actual teaching tends to make us all careless at this point. Yet this is the very point above all others that is vital to the pupil. Inspiring teaching may compensate in large degree for poor management, but nothing can make up to a pupil for dull and unskillful teaching. If the recitations are for him a failure, nothing else can make the school a success so far as he is concerned.

*The ultimate measure of a teacher, therefore, is the measure taken before his class, while he is conducting a recitation.*

### *2. The necessity of having a clear aim*

Any discussion of the recitation should begin with its aims or purposes; for upon aim or purpose everything else depends. For example, if

## THE RECITATION

you ask me the best method of conducting a recitation, I shall have to inquire before answering, whether your purpose in this recitation is to discover what the pupils have prepared of the work assigned them; or to introduce the class to a new subject, such as percentage in arithmetic; or to drill them, as upon the multiplication table. Each of these purposes would demand a different method in the recitation. Again, if your purpose is to show off a class before visitors, you will need to use a very different method from what you will employ if your aim is to encourage the class in self-expression and independence in thinking.

There are three great purposes to be accomplished through the recitation: *testing*, *teaching*, and *drilling*. These three aims may all be accomplished at times in the same recitation, may even alternate with each other in successive questions, but they are nevertheless wholly distinct from each other, and require different methods for their accomplishment. The skillful teacher will have one or the other of these three aims before him either consciously or unconsciously at each moment of the recitation, and will know when

## PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION

he changes from one to the other and for what reason. Let us proceed to consider each of these aims somewhat more in detail.

### 3. *Testing as an aim in the recitation*

Testing deals with ground already covered, with matter already learned, or with powers already developed. It concerns itself with the old, instead of progressing into the new. It seeks to find out what the child knows or what he can do of that which he has already been over in his work. Of course every new lesson or task attempted is in some measure a test of all that has preceded it, but testing needs to be much more definite and specific than this.

The testing discussed here must not be confused with what we sometimes call "tests," but which really are examinations, given at more or less infrequent intervals. Testing may and should be carried on in the regular daily recitations by questions and answers either oral or written, bearing on matter previously assigned; by discussions of topics of the lesson assigned; or by requiring new work involving the knowledge or

## THE RECITATION

power gained in the past work which is being tested. The following are some of the principal things which we should test in the recitation:—

*a. The preparation of the lesson assigned.*—The preparation of every lesson assigned should be tested in some definite way. This is of the utmost importance, especially in all elementary grades. We are all so constituted mentally that we have a tendency to grow careless in assigned tasks if their performance is not strictly required of us. No matter how careful may be the assignment of the lesson, and no matter how much the teacher may urge upon the class at the time of the assignment that they prepare the lesson well, the pupils must be held responsible for this preparation day by day, without fail, if we are to insure their mastery of it.

Nor is it enough to inquire, "How many understand this lesson?" or "How many got all the examples?" It is the teacher's business to test thoroughly for himself the pupil's mastery of the lesson or the knowledge or power required for the examples, in some definite and concrete way. It will not suffice to take the pupil's judgment

## PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION

of his own preparation and mastery, for many will allow a hazy or doubtful point to go by unexplained rather than confess before teacher and class their lack of study or inability to grasp the topic. Further, pupils seldom have the standards of mastery which enable them to judge what constitutes an adequate grasp of the subject.

*b. The pupil's knowledge and his methods of study.*—Entirely aside from the question of the preparation of the lesson assigned, the teacher must constantly test the pupil's knowledge in order that he may know how and what next to teach him; for no maxim of teaching is better established than that we should proceed from the known to the related unknown. And this is only another way of saying that we should build all new knowledge upon the foundation of knowledge already mastered.

To illustrate: Pupils must have a thorough mastery and ready knowledge of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division before we can proceed to teach them measurements or fractions. And without doubt much time is wasted in attempting to teach these subjects without a ready

## THE RECITATION

command of the fundamental operations. Further, pupils must know well both common and decimal fractions before they can proceed to percentage. They must know and be able to recognize readily the different "parts of speech" before they can analyze sentences in grammar.

But not less important than what the pupil knows is *how* he knows the thing; that is, what are his methods of study and learning. The pupil in a history class may be able to recite whole pages of the text almost verbatim, but when questioned as to the meaning of the events and facts show very little knowledge about them. A student confessed to her teacher that she had committed all her geometry lessons to memory instead of reasoning them out. She could in this way satisfy a careless teacher who did not take the trouble to inquire how the pupil had prepared her lessons, but she knew little or no geometry.

The mind has what may be called three different levels. The first is the *sensory* level, represented by the phrase "in at one ear and out of the other." Every one has experienced reading a page when the mind would wander and only the eyes



## PURPOSES OF THE RECITATION

follow the lines on down to the bottom of the page, nothing remaining as to the meaning of the text. It is easy to glance a lesson over just before reciting, and have it stick in the memory only long enough to serve the purposes of the recitation. Things learned in this way are not permanently serviceable and really constitute no part of an education.

The second level of the mind may be called the *memory* level. Matter which enters the mind only to this depth may be retained for a considerable time but is little understood and hence of small value. All rules and definitions committed without knowing their meaning or seeing their application, and all lessons learned merely to recite without a reasonable grasp of their meaning, sink only as deep as the memory level.

The third and deepest level is that of the *understanding*. Matter which permeates down through the sensory and memory levels, getting thoroughly into the understanding level, is not only remembered but is understood and applied, and therefore becomes of real service in our education. Of course it is clear that the ideal in teaching should be to