

The Significance of the Junior College Library in My Educational Program

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ANY DISCUSSION of "significance" in connection with libraries or with the profession of teaching demands a definition of that much-abused word. I have a strong feeling that the word has become a little parcel of jargon in the world of education, where words usually lose more sense than they gain with the passage of seminars, conferences, and conventions. Strictly, a significant object or institution is one which betokens an essential meaning; it is a symbol of a basic ideal, an embodiment of an influential value.

To me, as a teacher or as an everyday citizen, any library means a house of knowledge, a place of experiments among knowledges, an available source of what past minds have thought and present minds remember.

Indeed, any fairly precise statement of the significance of the library requires of the teacher an equally precise statement of his philosophy of teaching. For surely the teacher must depend on the library as the merchant depends on his storehouse. The teacher must perceive, I feel quite sure, that he is a clerk and guide to minds that

have come out of the past and that must, to live quite happily, be restored to it—restored to it in the sense of being made aware of the extent and richness of our cultural heritage, restored by means of such tools as expert reading, precise oral and written expression, restored, as a consequence, to a pattern of spirit designed by the great minds of the past.

No teacher, of course, ever achieves this end. But he must make his way, if ever so slightly, toward it. He must think out practical means of exposing student mind to cultural heritage. He must gratefully adopt, or resolutely reject, past teaching methods. His only method can be, at last, in spite of all the fine textbooks on the subject, the result of his ingenuity and his understanding of the separate needs and hungers and dislikes and indifferences of the willing, or unwilling, minds that challenge positive achievement.

The success of such enterprise is qualified and sometimes definitely determined by the teacher's use of the library. It should be palpably a commonplace in this company to say that the teacher who feels that classroom and textbook work is enough can only dismally fail to realize the true objectives of his profession.

I cannot pretend to have exhausted the educational possibilities of the library. My experience has been neither long nor

varied, but even such short time has shown me that certain principles must be adopted and the practices they demand unwervingly pursued.

These principles rise out of the nature of the immediate educational situation. In the junior college the students have little cultural or scholarly experience. They do not know their way about the storehouse and, even after they have found their way, they cannot begin to appraise the differing values of the items housed there.

Such a condition gives rise to the first principle—required reading.

This is a touchy thing. Students shy at the phrase, and even when teachers (given a measure of sensitiveness) operate on its permissible premise they do so with a certain hidden embarrassment. I confess candidly that I am not much deterred by such sentimental barriers. I am aware of the literature that argues free roving but I am not persuaded. I agree that there are many ways of getting an education, and institutionalized methods constitute only one way; but formal education is formal education or it is futile play. To me, formal education means a system of established disciplines—flexible enough to meet the needs of the day, inflexible enough to restore the student mind, which we as teachers inherit from the past, to the intellectual and spiritual designs of solid knowledge.

Required Reading in Practice

I have been talking in large terms. Permit me now to describe how this discipline of required reading works out in practice. As a teacher of English composition and literature, on both the high school and the college levels, and as a lecturer in our survey of humanities on world

literature, philosophy, and religion, I insist that my students have recognizable contact with the literary and philosophical masterpieces of the past—selected, of course, according to the age and ability of the student. I require, as do the other instructors in my institution, that the student explore a certain minimum of pages each week. In my course in the history of English literature I require that the students read and report on a minimum of fifty pages every week, in texts that will further their biographical and historical information and in texts that will give them a fuller view of poems, essays, and novels not completely treated in the everyday text. Reports of such reading must be carefully made in terms of content and criticism. Mimeographed forms for this purpose are housed in the library. The same requirements for the same reasons are made in our survey of the humanities.

As a teacher of high school senior English it has been my desire and aim to encourage as wide and frequent a use of the library as possible. Almost daily the students have brief library work to do, usually biographical in nature. But as climax to the course the students are held responsible for a major undertaking. This year, in the carrying out of this enterprise, the class was divided into research committees, headed by students who had demonstrated their ability for leadership. Each committee was given a definite task. One group was to acquaint itself with modern Middle Western poets, another with New England poets, another with the Imagist movement, another with postwar poets and their moral and intellectual problems, and so on. These teams worked, on the whole, quite well. A certain spirit of friendly rivalry and the stimulation that rose out of the need to report findings to the entire

class made for satisfying results. The library stock was sorely tried by this enterprise, but not beyond the limits of the material resources of the library and the enduring patience of the librarian. In addition, my high school students are encouraged to use current periodicals, the *Readers' Guide*, and other indices, as well as such works as the *Dictionary of National Biography*, not only to further their knowledge of classroom material but also to stimulate thinking and to provide ideas for the writing of regular themes.

As a teacher of college freshman composition, I make frequent special assignments, in the following literary forms which the student must eventually be able to analyze with respectable skill: the essay, the short story, the novel, the biography, the lyric poem. Special oral reports are frequently called for in each of these fields. The student must make his own way as much as possible.

An Analysis of Literary Masterpieces

This year in freshman composition I instituted a new undertaking. My class was a selected one. Only students of superior ability made up its personnel. After some searching of conscience, I determined to depart from the conventional final examination. I assigned to each individual student a great masterpiece of fiction, and told the students that analysis of fictional structure, awareness of methods of characterization, explanation of ideological themes would condition my judgment of the quality of their achievement. The library was drawn on for such books as the following: *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Budden-*

brooks, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Crime and Punishment*, and many others of like quality. The results were good. Required reading and library cooperation gave these students experiences that they will never forget, experiences, indeed, which many of them some day will repeat with pleasure. Without requirement these people would, quite naturally, postpone the reading of such books. The first fear is now over. They are ready for mature reading.

The next principle that rises out of student interest and need is recreational reading. We use two specific devices for encouraging wide general reading among our students. The first is the monthly book report which is written in the classroom without benefit of text. The second is an honors reading credit—given to students who successfully complete a stipulated program of general reading. The standards are high; no vague perusal of the work of mediocrities is permitted.

This, then, is a brief and, I fear, inadequate sketch of my use of the library, of my single attempt to lead my students to an understanding and appreciation of what the library storehouse can give. I try to make it clear to my students that a single book can change one's whole way of life and can assign to the future new direction toward intellectual and spiritual delight.

The library will be the student's educational institution in days when the classroom and its rigors are forgotten. If the students find the library a treasury of delight through the years of school, they will find it a source of orderly pleasure in years hereafter.