

A DEADLY PARADOX

How many of us can truthfully say that we are fulfilling our debt to the future as molders of those in whose hands it will be? As parent and teachers, our powers of persuasion for their good should exceed a skyscraper full of ad men. All of us here bear the responsibility of preparing a generation for a world infinite as space and familiar as the kitchen sink.

Tomorrows generations must be better than we are, must go further in thinking, as they will in space, must learn new skills of intellect as they will of electronics, must learn anew what our pioneer forefathers valued so highly, the qualities of being a good neighbor, not just to the little group inside the stockades of their private world but being neighbors in the full sense of the word to Zulus and Russians, Eskimos and Bushmen, Kafirs and Dalai Lamas and for all we know, Martians too.

What has all this to do with the library-school relationship? Everything. Today's world changes almost ostentatiously from minute to minute. Today's jobs, whether industrial, professional, agricultural or domestic change with it. For the many whose work will be their career there can be no pause between the diploma, or one's name on a door, and continuing study. Often neither time nor finances will permit taking post graduate courses, as often the free, utterly flexible courses available in any subject and taught by the top minds in any field are not even considered. For countless busy men and women, the library is a relic consigned to the limbo of term papers and book reports.

Here we come to the crux of what I call the deadly paradox.

Our young people are trained for their futures to some extent; they learn to build a house, tune a motor, give an intelligence test; they learn to vote and make good impressions on prospective employers. They are, it is assumed, prepared to go into the world and carry their share of its burdens, but they have not learned how to keep abreast of new developments in their fields, to find the answers they need for a sudden problem, nor how to improve their understanding by delving into the works of experts. The one completely available source of knowledge and help is, eight out of ten times, ignored. Why? It is not that librarians are such frightening individuals as there were once reputed to be, cloistered in green-shaded gloom, calling SH*H*H in sepulchral tones. Today's librarians are a friendly crew, passionately interested in helping their various publics. No, it is the same thing that makes each of us shy away from the task he is poor at, fear of what is insufficiently understood.

My complaint against today's education is that the simple tools for basic reference are not being taught, that their use and exercise in the schools is sporadic. Most dismaying of all, that the exhilaration of seeking and tracing down an elusive fact or thought or line is not even touched on.

High school people, college people, grammar and primary school people come into the library, look around helplessly at books and periodicals, at tables and lamps and chairs, give up and ask plaintively of the librarian, "Don't you have a book on France, or mammals, or

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inventions, or stones?" as the case may be. Card catalogs, posters charting the Dewey Decimal system inviting headed HOW TO FIND A BOOK, the Reader's Guide to Periodicals, are as arcane to them as the theorem for nuclear fission. This borders on catastrophe.

I would like to take a little longer and tell you of something we tried in Whately.

I suggested to the principal of the East Whately Grammar School, grades three through six, giving brief courses to each grade on the use of basic reference tools. Both Mr. Gaborn, then superintendent, and Mrs. Hall, principal, were enthusiastic over the suggestion.

Equipped with a drawer from our card catalog file, a world Almanac, The National Geographic Index, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and a Gazetteer – not to mention a cart full of magazines – I gave two-hour courses in each of the four grades. Incidentally, in each room the pupils elected to forego their afternoon recess in order to have more time for looking things up. I had cards with questions on them that could only be answered by using the materials before them. Dividing each class into teams of two or three with a captain for each team, I gave them a query on a card to find an answer to. Each class began with an alphabet drill and a brief description with illustrations of the unique qualities in each of the tools presented.

For the third and fourth grades I confined my explanation to the National Geographic Index, The World Almanac, the card catalog file and the importance of indexes. They were familiar to some extent with dictionaries and encyclopedias. Their attitude was a remarkable commentary on the beauty of intellectual innocence. They were enthralled with the detective work involved, and considered the problems custom made quiz games. The World Almanac captivated all of them and at the Christmas Book Fair I had orders for 26 from their parents for Christmas gifts.

In the fifth and sixth grades I had first to break down a barrier of unwillingness to do the work teachers and librarians should be doing . . . as far as they were concerned. Once that feeling was broken down they entered into the spirit of reference work as vigorously as had the two younger grades.

The results have been far reaching, as there continues to be a group of those pupils who say when they come in to the library, "I think I can find it myself" and at least try to look up something on their own.

To conclude: If some pedagogic fairy godmother were to grant me three wishes I would ask;

First, that pupils in the first and second grades learn the alphabet as well as they learn their multiplication tables with daily drills and exercises so that when they see L, m, n leap to their minds as well as j, k. the alphabet today is like a fine tool kept in its layers of cotton – known but seldom used.

As Jaques Barzun said in his "House of Intellect"

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"The Alphabet" – a product of successive acts of intelligence which when completed turned into one of the indispensable furnishings of the House of Intellect." he goes on, "You cannot look up the simplest work in the dictionary, you cannot work with books, or in a laboratory, you cannot find your friend's telephone number unless you know the letters in their arbitrary forms and conventional order."

Next, I would wish that the third and fourth grades be given exercise daily in the uses of encyclopedias, Dictionaries, Indexes, and the World Almanac.

And finally, starting at the fifth grade level and continuing through high school, that part of the time devoted to English and composition be allotted daily to perfecting the student's ability to use reference materials, accompanied by quizzes and research projects.

So that when he enters college, the independent study required there need not discourage him, and all of knowledge wear a friendlier aspect.

Thank you so much for letting me go on at such lengths on a cherished dream.

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