

# Journal of Pedagogy

VOL. XVIII

JUNE, 1906

No. 4

---

**The Philological Fetish  
in Literature  
Teaching**

Frequent references in these pages to what we can not but consider false aims and bad methods of literature teaching in the secondary schools do not justify the inference that we hold the teaching of literature in the colleges blameless. There can be found in the colleges, just as there can be found in the secondary schools, far better teaching than was the rule a decade or two ago, but on the whole the colleges are still too much under the influence of the so-called scientific method of teaching literature to enable them to show fruitful results at all in keeping with the value of the subject as a means of education and culture. In this respect France is far ahead of American teachers of literature. For much of the profitless teaching of English literature in the secondary schools, the colleges are primarily responsible because of their insistence upon the philological side of the work, to the comparative neglect of the literature side. Because college teachers of literature, especially of English literature, still make a fetish of the philological, or so-called scientific method of teaching English literature, it is not surprising that teachers of this subject in the secondary schools begin their class-room work as instructors with wrong aims. Linguistics and the minutiae of literary history rather than literature itself receive the larger recog-

## The Preceptorial System At Princeton University

**P**RINCETON has made a departure in the educational methods pursued in this country by the installation of a new system of student instruction and supervision known as the preceptorial system. It resembles the Oxford tutorial system in many essential particulars, being indeed suggested by it, and yet it differs from the Oxford system in the manner of its adaptation to the needs and traditions of an American university. At the beginning of the present academic year some fifty new members were added to the teaching force of Princeton University in the capacity of so-called preceptors, with the rank of assistant-professors. All of them were men who brought to their tasks a rich teaching experience and a high order of scholarship.

The large university, because of the diversity of activities and interests, and the general complexity of its highly differentiated organism, presents, as one of its chief problems, the conservation of its waste material. It is the same problem which the manufacturers of our country are facing, with a difference only as regards the nature of the material with which their activities deal. And the student of the problems of education may learn something by way of suggestion from the wisdom of such men; for whenever the manufacturer realizes the fact that although he is turning out excellent products there is nevertheless a considerable waste in the process, he at once sets about the devising of some change in method and machinery. Now, it will be found that in any large university there is much material that goes to waste, a potential that never reaches a stage of

actual realization. This is due to numbers alone, not to mention other causes. It is a penalty which the large university pays to its greatness. The professor who lectures to one hundred undergraduates, in many cases to two hundred and more, can know nothing of individual needs and limitations, and instruction of this general nature fails of producing any impression whatever upon certain men, and the others it benefits to a degree which is by no means commensurate with the capabilities either of the lecturer or the student. Instruction at long range needs something of a complementary nature to make good its obvious deficiencies. It is the preceptor's function, therefore, to perform this service and to conserve the waste energy and material. To this end he meets the students in small groups of three and four, or, preferably, when it is practicable, one man at a time, in stated conferences upon the collateral reading which is assigned in connection with all class-room work. The student meets his preceptor one hour a week in each course which he is pursuing. The courses in Princeton are on the basis of a three-hour unit. Ordinarily two of the three hours are devoted to lectures or class-room instruction by the professor who is in charge of the course. The third hour is left free for the preceptorial conference. As each student is required to take five courses, this gives five hours each week for these conferences. Moreover, the course of study is so arranged at Princeton that after Sophomore year a man is required to choose some one department in which his major studies lie, with the privilege of electing his minor courses in other departments. It is possible, therefore, to assign a student to one preceptor for all of the courses belonging to the department which he has chosen. Indeed this is regarded as highly desirable, for it enables the student to concentrate in his work under the guidance of one man. There is no dissipation of influence consequently; and the continuity of the student's efforts in the line of his special interests is thus assured. By this close

communion of thought within an area of definite and limited range the preceptor has an abundant opportunity of proving himself a veritable "guide, philosopher and friend."

The preceptor's main task is to take the student over the ground which is covered by the assigned reading. This reading, it is to be remembered, is in connection with the subject-matter of the lectures, and it is the function of the professor who is giving the course to co-ordinate his lectures with the collateral reading. Every lecture course is thus buttressed by the substantial material which the student is gathering from his regular weekly readings and conferences. This is an incalculable advantage to the lecturer. He need not spend all of his energies in definition and exposition. He can take for granted a certain familiarity with his subject. He can pass on from the rudiments and enter upon a discussion of its fundamental principles and problems. The weekly conference is creating an audience of interested, intelligent, and often critical hearers, and this tends to put the lecturer upon his mettle. This conference upon the reading which the students are doing is not a quiz merely, it is essentially a conferring together. Here difficulties are stated, points of difference are discussed, passages calling for criticism or special appreciation, as the case may be, are pointed out, new interpretations are suggested, and the heart of the subject becomes permanently possessed.

Moreover, every student will present to his preceptor some special problem growing out of his limitations or, it may be, due to his peculiar bent and talent. There are, it seems to me, three classes of students which must be variously dealt with by the preceptor according to their several needs:

1. There is a class of students whose aim is to do a minimum amount of work in order to pass examinations and to secure a degree at the last. They have no ambition beyond this poor ideal of mediocre attainment. Throughout

their university course they always follow the line of least resistance. They are content to make the so-called "gentleman's group" as regards their ranking in class. This group is commonly the fourth; it may possibly be the third, but it is never so high as the second or first. Men of this kind recognize as the best friend of their academic career the syllabus which serves as a life-preserver in the time of trial. The syllabus is a superficial and often crude digest of the subject-matter covered by the lecture course, and is often swallowed whole just before the examination, with no possibility of any accompanying process of digestion and assimilation. Now there are two services which it is in the power and function of the preceptor to perform for the students who entertain such an attitude of mind towards their college work. He can create a feeling of responsibility, a feeling that a certain amount of work is expected of them, and that this work should be done regularly and consistently throughout the term, and not hurriedly crammed on the eve of the examination. This feeling of responsibility is aroused not merely by the influence of the preceptor, but by the nature of the system itself, by the very logic of the situation. For when a student enters a classroom where there are thirty or forty men, any one of whom may be called upon to recite, he is willing to take the gambler's chance and trust that the lot may not fall to him. It is better to run the risk, he argues, than to take the trouble to prepare the lesson and then possibly not be called upon at all. But when he meets his preceptor alone, the hazard becomes a certainty. He knows that for this conference he must make some definite and painstaking preparation, for, face to face with his preceptor, he must give some account of his reading; if nothing else, he must be able to ask intelligent questions about it. There is no escaping such a test or such an opportunity.

In the second place, the preceptor for this class of students must create an interest in the subject. No machin-

ery, no system can do this; it must proceed from the personality of the preceptor. He is a man who from all possible fields of work has chosen one and devoted his life to it. It is natural to expect that he should be enthusiastic about his subject and should impart his spirit to the student. Dr. McCosh was asked at one time what he considered to be the prime requisite of a teacher, and his answer was, "He must be alive." By the quickening spirit of the teacher the dry bones of his subject must be touched with life. The student, who from time to time meets his preceptor in that informal manner which tends to the complete revelation of personality, cannot fail to catch the inspiration of his guide; and if once his interest is incited, it means the increase of attention, and with increase of attention comes concentration, and where there is concentration there is always efficiency. It may be objected in this connection that, if a man cannot of himself maintain a respectable standing in his college course, he should be dropped, and that he has only himself to blame. But however much the responsibility of a man's failure in college may be due to himself, the fact remains that he must be regarded as an unsolved problem. That something might have been done to save him may be suggested as a possibility at least. Such a problem the preceptorial system is attempting to solve. To utilize the waste material, to overcome the resistance of natural inertia, and to turn the possible failure of such men into a creditable performance is one of the chief ends of the system.

2. There is a class of students who are conscientious in their work, but who, early in their college course, have grown discouraged. Their efforts bring no satisfactory results. Their diligence and conscientious endeavor seem to be wholly unrewarded. This may be due to insufficient preparation, and this very often proves to be the case. But it may be due to the fact that the student has never acquired the art of study. He is an unskilled workman.

He is like the athlete who may have native ability, brawn and muscle, but who has yet to learn the rudiments of the game, and, before everything else, how to fall on the ball. And so it is with a student who stands bewildered before a mass of details which confront him. He has never learned the trick of seizing the central thought of a subject and correlating everything else with it and seeing how they hang together,—dropping out the unessential elements and, in the field of thought, falling on the ball. Now the function of a preceptor in reference to such a man is not that of a nurse, nor is it that of a mere coach, but it is essentially that of a diagnostician. The case of such a student must be examined with exceeding care and an expert diagnosis reached. It may be found that he is using his memory wholly in getting up his tasks, and his reasoning powers are not engaged at all; or his imagination may need to be quickened; or his faculty of discrimination should be exercised; or he may need some practical aids to concentration, such as the use of written exercises, abstracts, digests, etc., which he may be required to prepare for the preceptorial conference. Whatever may be his limitations, it is the duty of the preceptor to discover them and to adapt his methods of instruction accordingly. The greatest service which a teacher can perform for his student is to teach him the true method of study; with it comes facility and pleasure in one's work. But where a method is lacking, the best of effort is without compensation.

3 The third class comprises the students of ability who, at the same time, are doing excellent work in all of their courses. In every university there are students who will succeed and benefit by the instruction which they receive, whatever may be the method pursued. But in reference to this class there is often a considerable waste in the failure to develop fully the manifold possibilities which are present. Such students can gain more from a preceptor because they are able to bring more to him. Where there is no personal

guiding, a student may be doing his task to the best of his ability, learning the lessons assigned, passing the examinations and even taking honors at the end of his course, but also he may be missing much by the way. The function of the preceptor in reference to such a student is largely that of suggestion. The student is passing through unknown territory and following closely the beaten paths; it is possible to do him an inestimable service by pointing out the byways into which he may wander and where he may discover much that is hidden from the main way; or at times he may lead him to higher levels, whence there is a wider prospect and a lifting horizon and it is possible for him to look over and beyond into a land which one day he may possess. The preceptor should impart to him not merely the letter, but the spirit of scholarship as well. With such direction and inspiration the student falls naturally into habits of critical judgment. He has opinions and he is able to justify them. He knows how to conduct himself in unknown regions of investigation. He is not bewildered by new problems. He has an ambition to compass a subject and not merely to master a text-book or to pass an examination. He learns to penetrate beneath the surface of things, and to discover the heart of their hidden meanings, and, above all, to discriminate between real and false values, and to put supreme emphasis upon the things of supreme worth and significance.

In this sketch of the preceptorial function, it will be readily recognized that the success of the system turns naturally upon the personality of the preceptor. It is through the personal and intimate contact of the student with his guide in matters intellectual that the desired end is to be reached. Where there is mutual understanding and co-operation, the right kind of scholarship must inevitably result.

The success of the system at Princeton seems to be assured. The undergraduates have adapted themselves to the new conditions with a surprising readiness, and with

results which are most satisfactory. There has been a notable increase in the amount of work which has been done so far during this year, and also the quality of the work has improved in a very marked degree. If any one has not caught the spirit of work which is unmistakably the spirit of the place, it is safe to say that his academic days are numbered. An adequate judgment as to the full significance and merits of the system cannot be reached until a generation at least of undergraduates has experienced its influences throughout the four years of the university course. Then, when the student has been under preceptorial care from the beginning of his Freshman year until his graduation, it will be possible to estimate the value of the system in terms of the finished product which it evolves.

JOHN GRIER HIBBEN.

*Princeton University.*