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A Study of Materials and Methods for Guiding Students to an Appreciation of Good Literature

Sandra Emily Cox
Central Washington University

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A STUDY OF MATERIALS AND METHODS FOR
GUIDING STUDENTS TO AN APPRECIATION
OF GOOD LITERATURE

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington College of Education

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Sandra Emily Cox
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THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING THE PLAN 2
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PAPER.

Catharine Bullard FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

I. THE PROBLEM

One of the most important aspects of English teaching is guiding students to an appreciation of good literature. In this field are a wealth of experiences and a depth in appeal seldom found in other subjects. However, the problems of what students like, why they like it, and exactly how teachers can guide students to enjoy the better quality of literature arise. These problems will be discussed, analyzed, and some solutions suggested on the following pages.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Literature

As used in this paper, literature means merely reading material, all forms and types.

Good Literature

Meeting established literary standards, good literature should give to the adolescent insight into life or enjoyment of the author's experiences in a way that would enrich his own life.

Adolescents

The adolescents mentioned in the paper are of junior high and senior high school age.

Motives

There are drives or reasons behind a student's particular choice of reading material.

Intensive Reading

This refers to close, textbook type reading, spending a great deal of time on fewer selections in one book.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading begins with one or more selections in common, spending less time on these, then includes various related literary selections to supplement a textbook.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE AND THE NATURE OF THE ADOLESCENT

I. MOTIVES FOR READING

When questioned as to why they choose certain literature, "Young people frequently report that they liked a story or novel because 'it was so true to life' without any real understanding of what they are saying" (10:180). Upon looking a little deeper into motives in reading, it is discovered that students choose reading selections for various reasons.

Concern with Problems Related to Adolescence

Adolescents often read stories of young people with problems similar to their own. As Berry states, "Through biography, poetry, fiction, and drama, a person perceives himself and hears echoes of his own thoughts and feelings" (4:281). The adolescent faces many problems, especially those of establishing relations--between himself and his parents, between himself and his peers, and between himself and the world in general. By reading books in which the characters have similar problems, the adolescent can see objectively how they handle the problem and thus gain knowledge of how to approach his own problems. Burton says,

"Few adolescent readers would admit, however, that they were reading or studying literature in order to gain wisdom" (7:6). Even though some will not admit it, adolescents are constantly searching for identity and an understanding of life.

Adolescents face other problems:

1. School problems: grades, relations with teachers...
2. Personal problems: shyness, anxieties, fears, nervousness...
3. Family problems: late hours, dating...
4. Money: part-time jobs, inadequate allowances...
5. Boy-girl relations: dates, going steady, popularity...
6. Concern about the future: career, success or failure...
7. Recreation problems: use of leisure, success in sports, need for car...
8. Problems of personal appearance...
9. Danger from world tensions: draft, Army, war...
10. Moral issues and ideals: smoking, drinking, lying (29:219).

These may be partly summed up by the following six needs in human life expressed by Berry:

1. Need for love and affection
2. Security
3. Recognition
4. Self-respect
5. Creativity
6. New experiences (4:300).

The adolescent encounters, as he matures, many developmental tasks. He is at an age in which the struggle for maturity brings many problems to his mind, problems which may be partly solved or at least encountered by others in the

literature he selects. Lists of books containing problems may be found (7:17, 241-244).

Escape

Besides reading to find personal problems and their solutions, students select literature for other reasons. Often, overwhelmed by the increasing responsibilities of maturity, they read to find escape from their everyday world. Through historical romances, travel, or science fiction (just to mention a few types) adolescents do escape for a time their ordinary and sometimes humdrum life.

Curiosity

Still another motive for reading is curiosity. Adolescents desire to know about the future and their part in it. They seek information about the unknown--foreign lands, careers they are interested in, and a wide span of experiences they have not yet encountered.

Enjoyment

Underlying all these motives for reading is enjoyment. Often students enjoy literature, but are not able to explain why. Perhaps it does add to their ability to handle a problem or does give them escape or answer a question in their minds, but maybe they just appreciate an author's

style or sense of humor. According to Smith, "The love for a good story is one of the few mental cravings that accompanies mankind from the cradle to the grave" (27:239). Burton echoes this statement by saying, "The principal motive of the adolescent (and of most adults) in reading literature is to gain enjoyment" (7:2).

II. CONTENT, AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN WHAT ADOLESCENTS LIKE

Realizing the motives that cause students to read certain selections, then, is important; but one must consider other factors before trying to guide students in their appreciation of good literature. Literature appeals to adolescents in varying degrees, depending upon the student's age, sex, and intelligence. Also, as will be shown, the opinions of authorities, who have suggested what adolescents should read, do not always coincide with what students really do enjoy in the way of good literature. (These authorities are editors of various anthologies, including "famous poets and several of the most widely recognized writers about children's reading") (22:73).

Because of Age

The age of a child has quite an influence on his choice of literature.

It appears from the evidence presented that the degree of maturity reached exerts a major influence upon children's reading interests and that as children grow older the rate of change in interest gradually diminishes...that increasing maturity brings an increase in some kinds of reading materials and a decrease in interest in others (22:33-34).

Norvell points out that younger children appreciate poetry more than older children because they enjoy the rhythm, sound patterns, and imaginative use of verse.

Because of Sex

Also, girls of all ages tend to like poetry more than do boys (22:26, 38-39). This difference does not become appreciably noticeable until junior high age. Then boys especially show a dislike for girls' books. (Boys' books would be those with males as the central characters, girls' books those with female central characters).

Myths, legends, and hero tales are frequently better liked by boys than by girls, probably because many of them emphasize the strenuous adventure, feats of strength, and warlike combat that appeals to boys (22:40).

Although girls do enjoy boys' books, boys will not tolerate girls' books because of their content. "Love remains a predominant interest at the upper levels, and for the girls,

especially, furnishes powerful motivation for reading" (10:178). If, however, boys do read for love interest, they are not eager to admit it.

Because of Intelligence

Intelligence of the adolescent is not thought to influence too greatly his choice of reading selections. The only definite conclusions about intelligence and its influence are that brighter students tend to reject the humorous selections, especially humorous poetry, and reject these selections more forcefully than does the average student (22:46, 50-51). According to Norvell, "On the basis of children's opinions...the experts are usually wrong in their designation of poets children enjoy" (22:123). It seems students value poems rather than poets. Many poets that authorities feel youngsters should appreciate rank much lower when actually rated by the students. For example, Shakespeare's songs and poems by Walter de la Mare, William Blake, Christina Rossetti, and Hilda Conkling do not have the appeal that authorities feel they should (22:58-62). In prose this same conflict between experts' and students' opinions is apparent. It would seem that, as De Boer states, "What do boys and girls want that

literature can give them?...is the decisive question to answer in planning a course and in choosing all reading material" (12:204).

III. SPECIFIC LITERARY FORMS AND THEIR APPEALS

Habit causes a person to read the type of literature he enjoys. Many students have never experienced the reading and consequent enjoyment of good literature. Their family library may not contain any of the reading material that will enrich their lives. Or they may never have had the occasion to search for themselves to find what they could appreciate and enjoy.

The reading of some youngsters seems to be governed by no conscious purposes at all. They read whatever they happen to find, choosing their books sometimes, we might suspect, only by the color of the covers (22:167).

Specific literary forms have certain appeals to students and will be briefly touched on in considering why students like the forms and which they prefer.

Prose

Prose is generally preferred to poetry. The students grasp the style of prose more easily because it sounds more natural.

Novels and short stories. These let the students see the characters' personalities, and, as mentioned previously, the adolescent can relate the characters' problems to his own and thereby help himself overcome these problems to some extent or at least realize he is not the only one with his particular problems. The short story is especially appealing to students because it holds their interest by being "short, simple in structure, familiar as a type of reading matter" (11:306).

Biographies and autobiographies. Adolescents find appeal in biographies and autobiographies, again because they can identify their problems with those faced by characters in the story. Biography has "a threefold appeal: (1) it deals with an interesting subject; (2) it speaks the truth; (3) and it strikes a responsive chord in every human heart" (26:361). Of the two, autobiography seems to have more appeal than biography.

Essays and drama. To students, essays are generally not of as much interest. Informal essays, however, are more enjoyable to students than formal essays if they relate to the students' interests. More mature students can write their own informal essays and thus feel a kinship with the author. In like manner, the students feel close to a

dramatist when they read and try to dramatize a play. By reading aloud, students can more clearly see and enjoy the situations presented. After becoming acquainted with dramatic structure, most students enjoy reading plays.

Magazines. "As in the case of books, young people tend to prefer those magazines to which they have easy access" (12:268). As youngsters, boys and girls have easy access to comic books, although interest in the comics has begun to decline by the time students reach high school age. Students spend a great deal of time in reading magazines "for amusement, for information, and for inspiration" (12:259), according to De Boer; but he feels that there is not enough guidance in American schools to help students determine good and poor quality magazine material although "high school youth, when constantly confronted with desirable magazines under favorable circumstances, will respond by developing keen and continuing interests in these magazines" (12:268). As in all types of literature, interest shown by students varies with sex. All students read and seemingly enjoy Reader's Digest, Life, and The Saturday Evening Post (12:264); but boys do differ from girls in that girls by the age of fifteen are more interested in women's magazines while boys like adventure, sports, and mechanics. Boys have

more varied interests in magazines than do girls although "both boys and girls in high school exhibit interest in the themes of adventure, humor, and love" (12:264).

Newspapers. A difference between boys and girls also appears in choosing newspaper selections. Youngsters spend from a half hour to an hour or more a day reading newspapers.

Comic strips lead all features of the newspaper in popularity, with sports and general news (foreign and national) following closely. Boys, of course, give high priority to sports news, girls to fashion news. Front-page news, as opposed to news stories on the inside pages, achieved high rank among the sections of the newspaper most widely read by both boys and girls (12:281).

Poetry

As previously mentioned, poetry drops in appeal as students become older. Girls enjoy poetry more than boys do. Norvell shows tables concerning these appeals (22:22, 36, 47).

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE AND THE TEACHER

After looking at the specific forms of literature that appeal to students, we find that adolescents do have preferences; and it becomes the teacher's responsibility to further the students' knowledge and appreciation of the types they already enjoy, adding to these other valued literary selections and types the students can grow to appreciate.

I. PROBLEMS TO OVERCOME IN TEACHING

Often, by the time a child enters school, his love for good literature has already been killed or lessened by well-meaning parents who have tried to guide him to an appreciation of literature but failed because they used poor techniques. Parents may try to educate a child by depriving him of comic books when he is at the stage when he enjoys comics and force a substitute they feel he should be reading. The child, not satisfied, is turned against "good" literature for life. Or teachers, feeling that memorization of poetry is necessary for a student to understand it, often force students to memorize poems which do not appeal to the

students' experiences:

Of course they hate poetry! Who wouldn't hate it if required to commit it to memory, particularly to memorize poems that he does not understand--and that often the teacher understands little better (5:271)!

However, most guidance in helping students to appreciate good literature is offered in all sincerity, the teacher actually believing he is doing his best to guide his students. In order to really teach literature, according to the NCTE Curriculum Commission, "A teacher of literature must be imaginative, sensitive to literature, aware of the values inherent in it" (10:155). If the teacher has not really experienced literature, he should not teach it. Some teachers enjoy literature so much they simply overwhelm students with good literature. This tends to confuse the students; they find themselves tackling second and even third selections of literature before they have fully understood and appreciated the first. Other teachers distribute book lists and allow students to browse for themselves among the books listed, but again the students need guidance in choosing the right books. Other examples of poor teaching techniques could be given, but instead it seems more beneficial to discuss the better practices of guiding students to an appreciation of good literature.

II. METHODS OF GUIDING STUDENTS

Consider Students as Individuals

Of utmost importance in helping students choose literature they will appreciate is finding the right selection for each individual.

In our heterogeneous society, variation from group to group, and within groups from individual to individual make it necessary for us to plan our reading program in terms of the specific group and the individual differences within it (23:69).

If the same selection must be read by the entire class, individual guidance may still be given through using various activities in connection with the selection. Some of these activities will be mentioned later. More preferable is discovering each student's interests, suggesting literature that parallels these interests, and then encouraging the student to read material related to these interests. In this way each individual will begin his study of literature with satisfaction and be willing to attempt his next selection with a pleasant memory of the first.

Choose Enjoyable, Interesting Selections

This matter of enjoyment in reading is probably the most important aspect in guiding students. "If the study of literature does not provide enjoyment, the teaching has been

a failure" (10:129). Here again, being forced to read will quickly and surely kill any interest a student might have shown. A teacher can help students learn to enjoy reading by encouraging them "to think with the author, to see with the author, and to feel with the author" (11:225). Many suggestions as to how to further the enjoyment of reading come to mind. Since the adolescent usually has a short interest span, possibly students could begin with short stories or shorter novels and later increase the length of the selections. When beginning to guide the students, a teacher should give shorter assignments and encourage more discussion. "'Extensive reading' as contrasted with 'intensive reading' as a favorable factor in the organization of learning" (20:94) could be introduced. These and many more possibilities should be tried to bring to the students true enjoyment of literature.

If high school pupils fail to enjoy their literature, the fault is with the teacher or with a situation that demands of the teacher an amount of work beyond the possibilities (5:407).

Introduce Literature Different from Students' Usual Choices

While considering students as individuals and helping them to find enjoyment in their reading, the teacher should also try to introduce literature different from that usually read by the students. Many students, once they have found

enjoyment in one type of literature, will wish to read only their favorite kind of story. These students should be helped to realize that diversity in reading brings satisfaction and enjoyment. In order to have a well-rounded reading experience, these various forms and topics of reading matter should be discovered by all students.

Relate Literature to Life

Possibly one of the best ways to interest students in various selections of literature is to relate the literature in some way to life. A teacher can give the background of the story, tell about the author, mention the traits of some of the characters in the selection, and in this way stimulate interest among the students. The purpose of reading is not just to read but to "guide students in acquiring reading habits that will carry over into their lives" (12:205).

Suggest Activities to Encourage Further Reading

Various activities connected with the reading of literature may be used by the teacher. Audio-visual aids: films, radio, television, filmstrips, tape recordings, and records; panel discussions; reading aloud; and varied forms of written material are some examples of the wealth of activities that can be brought into the study of literature

to stimulate students to read more good literature and to enjoy what they read.

Guide Students in Understanding Standards of Good Literature

Students must be aware of the standards of good literature. Many opinions as to what constitutes good literature could be cited. Burton states, "Literature should help young people to live a better life. A successful program of teaching literature need accept nothing less as its major outcome" (7:1). Smith says:

Genuine appreciation is not possible without some degree of spiritual depth and sympathy. As has been truly said, learning to appreciate good literature is learning to grow up (26:169).

Good literature, then, concerns life and how to enjoy it more fully. The problem is that many students who read "trashy" fiction and pulp adventure stories think they are reading stories of the life they have not yet experienced. These students must be helped to see the falseness of poorer types of reading selections and encouraged to want not only the thrills of reading, but the thrills of reading that help them face their futures. Dakin lists the requirements used to determine the winner of the O'Henry Memorial Award (11:306).

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As shown in the preceding pages, there are many sides to the question of how teachers can encourage adolescents to read good literature. The teacher must be aware that students do have problems as they mature and are interested in reading about others who have met and overcome similar problems. The age, sex, and intelligence often cause various students to enjoy certain kinds of reading matter and forms of literature more than others.

As a teacher tries to guide youngsters to appreciate good literature, he must keep in mind all the individual differences and backgrounds of his students, have in mind suggestions to offer each student, and hope to broaden the reading choices of all his class members by helping them see the standards of good literature. The greatest satisfaction a teacher of English can experience is seeing the results of his guidance as the students do choose various forms of good literature and enjoy them.

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¹Another good source book by Norvell is The Reading Interests of Young People. Boston: Heath, 1950.

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