

SCHOOL XXXIV.

This is one of the institutions considered most successful in preparing for Harvard. The system pursued in it, so far as English education is concerned, is set forth in the following papers:—

“My Preparation for English Composition.

“We were obliged, at the — School, to write a composition regularly once a month. But we also had subjects given out to us in class, on which to write short themes. Our general preparation in English was as follows:—

“We would read the books, one after another, prescribed for College English, in class. Each student was called upon to criticise certain portions of the passages read. Sometimes, after having read a chapter, the class was told to write out during the remaining portion of the hour a summary, or more generally a criticism, on that chapter. Then again the students might be told to write a summary or criticism upon the next chapter, which was to be read at home, and brought in at the next English. These were not to be carefully written, but were to be read in class, and the class was to criticise these productions.

“Once a month, however, subjects were given out to us to write upon one week or more in advance of the time the composition should be due. The subjects were greatly varied, but they all had some bearing on the school work in English. Several subjects were given at a time for us to choose from. We might have to write an essay on the author whose books we were reading or a criticism on one of his works. There were many other subjects of a different character, which time does not allow me to enumerate.

“These compositions generally covered seven or eight pages. They were carefully criticised in red ink by the teacher, who used the Harvard abbreviations, were to be corrected and handed back to him. Our teacher taught nothing but English, and had our class in English three hours during the week. Latin and Greek occupied five hours a week, French, German, and Mathematics generally three.

“I passed the English examination at Harvard College.”

“English Composition for College.

“My preparation for college was at the — School where there was a good deal of stress put upon English. We wrote compositions regularly, once a month, and when the compositions were corrected, they were rewritten and improved as much as possible. English, throughout the school course, came three times a week; of this about one hour a week was devoted to English composition, both to the writing of themes and to correcting and criticising them. In the other two hours there were usually rules and examples of rhetoric given.

“The subjects were varied: such as descriptions of places, incidents in your life, and subjects which required arguments. The aim seemed always to be to have the student use his own thoughts and expressions, and not give him subjects which he could copy from

books. Of course, near the Harvard examinations, themes were written on the books and the principal characters, like the themes we would be called upon to write.

“The criticisms were very numerous and as thorough as could be, the same mode of marking being adopted as is used at Harvard.

“The proportion of English to the other studies was: Latin and Greek from four to five times a week and the other studies from two to three times. English composition, strictly speaking, came once a week. But in the other two hours of English during the week, matters were given and discussed in direct relation to English composition.

“I passed in the entrance examination in English.”

As a rule, so far as method is concerned, the papers presented by students who had received their preliminary education at this school are better than the average. A facsimile of one, as little to be commended as any, will be found in the Appendix to this report. (No. 35.)

SCHOOL XXXV.

Five papers were presented from students who received their elementary education at this school, four of whom had passed the entrance examination. A facsimile of one of these papers will be found in the Appendix to this report. (No. 36.) The writer of this paper says that at — School, “every paper we wrote from Latin or Greek,” &c., was “brought as much as possible under the sway of good English.” The examination paper in advanced Latin of the same student, prepared by him as a candidate for admission to College, is also printed, and will be found in the Appendix to this report (page 159). It is not suggestive of “good English.”

SCHOOL XXXVI.

The system pursued in this school is sufficiently described in the following two, selected from thirteen papers:—

“My preparation in English composition at — School consisted in writing about seven compositions during the year. These compositions were simply outlines of the story in each one of the books appointed as subjects for the Harvard examination in English. I was also required at one recitation a week to correct four or five faulty sentences. The time devoted to my school work in English composition averaged, I should say, about one hour and a half a week, perhaps less, and bore about the same ratio to the time spent in the study of Greek, Latin, and Mathematics as I does to 8. In addition to this required school work, I did considerable voluntary work, as I was elected into a literary society and was also made an editor of the school paper. In these positions I aimed at being a universal genius,

English is concerned, therefore, the grammar-school theory would still seem to be the one enunciated by Dogberry some centuries ago, that "to write and read comes by nature"; while, in the collegiate preparatory schools another, not very dissimilar theory obtains, under which the scholar who passes hours each day in the oral translation of Greek or Latin authors, is supposed, when a pen is put in his hand and a sheet of paper before him, through some mysterious mental sleight-of-hand, to apply without practice his familiarity with the classics to the work of English Composition, — an educational process which is in fact calculated to produce the desired result in much the same way and just about as rationally as that adopted by the gentleman who, proposing to discuss Chinese metaphysics, read up in the encyclopaedia under the two heads of China and Metaphysics, and combined his information.

Satisfactory results, except perhaps so far as getting boys through an examination and into college is concerned, cannot be expected from such a method. Its crudeness is apparent; it is in no sense education.\* Indeed, there is not an instructor in any one of the academies, the systems of which have been described in the papers submitted to the Committee, who would not receive with derision the mere suggestion that the process through which instruction in English Composition is imparted should be used in the acquirement by a boy of a reasonable degree of facility in any outdoor game or form of amusement. To write English correctly and with ease is something not quickly or easily to be acquired. It is a good deal more difficult to acquire than, for instance, a fair degree of proficiency in the games of base-ball or lawn-tennis, or than riding on

"It seems to me that much more was said that would be done, than was actually done. We were to write a theme every two weeks, but during the whole [four years] I handed in only two exercises." — p. 140.

"The English work of those preparing for college was done at odd moments." — p. 141.

"I considered English my easiest study, and the reason given by the instructor was that the requirements and examinations set by Harvard College in English were not as severe as those set for other studies." — p. 141.

"About one in two weeks, and sometimes not so often as that." — p. 142.

"During the Middle and Senior years we had two compositions to write. . . . Sometimes, perhaps once or twice a term, we had a written exercise in class." — p. 143.

"Perhaps once a month we wrote compositions." — p. 143.

"About once in two months we were called upon to write an account of the plot of some book we had been reading." — p. 145.

\* "This neglect of the fundamental principles . . . is in itself a disgrace to the name of education." — p. 138.

a bicycle or sailing a boat, or than skating or swimming. Yet nearly every boy from the academy can do some one at least of these things with ease, and a degree of skill calculated to excite admiration. How is this facility acquired? It certainly is not acquired by studying rules in treatises, or by listening to lectures on curves, equilibrium, buoyancy of bodies or science of pitching and batting. The study of underlying principles is here discarded in favor of practice; and the practice is not at the rate of an hour in a month, or even an hour in two weeks, — the mere suggestion of such a thing would excite derisive surprise. — but it is daily and incessant. It is only through similar daily and incessant practice that the degree of facility in writing the mother-tongue is acquired which alone enables student or adult to use it as a tool in his work, — the way in which it ought to be used in the course of a college career. It is there not an end; it is an instrument.

What is English Composition? It is the art of writing the mother-tongue. Not infrequently it is said that certain persons have a natural facility in composition, while others are unable to acquire it. Undoubtedly, the power of composing, like everything else, is acquired by some much more easily than by others. But it is, in the judgment of the Committee, little less than absurd to suggest that any human being who can be taught to talk cannot likewise be taught to compose. Writing is merely the habit of talking with the pen instead of with the tongue. People are apt to forget that facility in talking is acquired only by incessant practice, — practice daily and hourly pursued from infancy throughout life. If children were taught to talk as the scholars in our schools are taught to write, what facility of oral utterance would they ever attain? Sitting in dumb silence, with the exception of one hour a month, or, in the schools disposed to be more thorough, one hour in two weeks, — as is now the case with written utterance, — they would ultimately speak English with about as much fluency and about as correctly as the average American college graduate now speaks French or German. On the other hand, if, as part of the necessary school discipline, the scholar were compelled to use his pen instead of his tongue for one or two hours a day, what skill in composition would he not attain? What he wrote would, it is true, probably not repay reading, just as what he says is, as a rule, not worth listening to; but that, as a result of practice, any youth could be trained to express himself in writing with as perfect an ease and facility as he does in speaking, cannot well be gainsaid.

This would seem to be obvious; and yet, judging by the papers printed or quoted from in this report, such a method would seem in

whose  
mother  
tongue?

if you  
can  
talk  
you  
can  
write

hardly a single case to enter into the recognized curriculum or system of any one of the scores of schools and academies which now undertake to prepare youths for entrance to Harvard College.

What is the result? That result can be studied in the papers and facsimiles submitted as part of this report. There are eight printed papers and forty-two facsimiles. — the facsimiles being nearly ten per cent. of the whole number of papers handed in. In the judgment of your Committee the writer of no one of those forty-two facsimiles had received adequate, or even respectable preparatory training in a branch of instruction undeniably elementary, and one accordingly in which a fair degree of excellence should be a necessary requisite for admission to a college course: for no young man who has not acquired a certain facility in writing his mother-tongue is in condition to derive advantage, such as he should derive, from such a course: that is, he cannot use a tool necessary to doing the work he has in hand to do.

The College, consequently, instead of being what its name implies, — a seminary of higher education, — becomes, in thus far, a mere academy, the instructors in which are subjected to the drudgery of teaching the elements. On the other hand, the remedy is within easy reach. At present a large corps of teachers have to be engaged and paid from the College treasury to do that which should have been done before the student presented himself for admission. While teaching these so-called students to write their mother-tongue, these instructors pass years correcting papers a mere glance at which shows that the present preparatory training is grossly inadequate.

As a result of its inquiries, therefore, and on the evidence set forth in this report, the recommendation of the Committee is distinct and emphatic, — it is that the College should forthwith, as regards English Composition, be put in its proper place as an institution of advanced education. The work of theme writing ought to be pronounced a part of the elementary training, and as such relegated to the preparatory schools. The student who presents himself for admission to the College, and who cannot write the English language with facility and correctness, should be sent back to the preparatory school to remain there until he can so write it. The College could then, as it should, relieve itself of one of the heaviest burdens now imposed upon it, while those admitted to College would be in position to enter immediately on the studies to which they propose to devote themselves; and if, during the College course, they take English Composition as an elective they should pursue it in its higher branches, and not, as now, in its most elementary form.

Presumably it may be urged by those in charge of the preparatory schools that the requisites for admission to the College have been now so raised that the schools cannot, with due regard to other and more necessary work to be done, devote more than an hour a month, or, at most, two hours a month, to a branch of instruction so crude, so unimportant, and so easily self-imparted as English Composition. The answer to this objection, if it is made, is obvious and conclusive: written English, like spoken English, must be taught as an incident, and not as an end, — collaterally. Exercises, especially in translating the classics or books in foreign tongues, should be in writing, as well as oral, and the student would thus acquire by daily practice a facility which he never can by any possibility acquire under the time-wasting systems now in general use. The Committee have called attention by the use of italics to the statement of one student that in the "small private school" in which he was fitted for College — "the preparation of English was carried out in every other subject; my translations from other languages were carefully criticised for their English; my geometry propositions I have rewritten many times on account of poor English." The Committee see no reason why this most rational system thus said to be applied in one school should not be applied in all; nor does it seem any act of hardship so to alter the present tests for admission as to compel the adoption of such a system.

The Committee recommend that a sufficient number of copies of this report be printed for the use not only of the Board of Overseers, but of the Faculty of the College, and the instructors in the preparatory schools. They would further recommend that steps be taken in relation to the standard of English Composition required for admission to our colleges which shall compel the preparatory schools to change their present systems, and raise the standard to the required point. While the Committee are confident that this result could easily be brought about, the only injury which, apparently, could ensue would be to keep out of college, possibly for one term, a certain percentage of young men whose presence there now acts as a mere drag or hindrance upon those more adequately prepared.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

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