Is the practice teacher always a liability? Sometimes the supervising teacher gains much insight into his own methods and classroom practice from the less experienced teacher—as did the author of this article.

PRACTICE TEACHERS have long met with a variety of receptions at the different high schools where they are sent to transform their learning into experience. At some schools the teachers to whom they are assigned welcome them gladly. At other schools, however, the practice teacher is sometimes regarded as a burden. In fact, some teachers I know refuse to work with a practice teacher. Their reasons for this refusal vary, but they generally fall into three categories: additional work is involved, students suffer from the inexperienced techniques of the practice teacher, and classroom routine is upset.

A department supervisor stopped me in the hall some days ago and asked if I would be willing to accept a practice teacher from one of the nearby colleges. Thinking of the disadvantages in such an arrangement, I hesitated before giving an answer. However, after some consideration, the idea appealed to me as a new adventure and I decided to accept the offer.

On the appointed day the practice teacher arrived at school. The department supervisor introduced him to the staff and helped him become acquainted with the general routine of the school. Then the practice teacher was turned over to my care. Recalling my own days as a practice teacher, I tried to remember how I had been introduced into the classroom. All I could think to do for the young teacher, however, was to explain the classroom procedure,

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give him the seating chart and explain that this was a new experience for me too.

The next few days were uneventful. I attempted to demonstrate educational psychology in practice. Together we planned the first few days’ program. Meanwhile, the practice teacher sat in the back of the room and took copious notes of all that happened, recorded marks and familiarized himself with the students.

An Assignment Is Given

Then it came time for me to step aside and turn the class over to the practice teacher. I had planned to spend the period in the back of the room correcting papers. Therefore, I armed myself with a red pencil, cleared off my desk and retired from active duty. Mingled among the sentences and phrases of the compositions I was correcting were the words of the practice teacher. As he spoke I became more interested. Finally, I came to the realization that I had much to learn from him. I laid the red pencil aside and leaned back in my chair to reflect upon his methods. His methods, I noted, were practically the same as those he had seen me use in the classroom. Although I was not seeing myself in action, I was seeing a person who was enough like me to cause me serious concern. I had said and done some of the very things that he was saying and doing, but from the front of the room they had seemed all right. Now, from where I sat in the back of the room, among the students, I could see that several major improvements in my own methods were necessary.

As I watched and listened, the students were being given the reading assignment for the following day. The title of the short story was given and the page number was written on the board for all to copy. After the students had dutifully written this in their notebooks, the practice teacher began the discussion of the present day’s assignment. Something seemed wrong with this as I listened, although such a practice had always seemed satisfactory when I had been at the front of the room. Now I recognized that nothing had been done to sell this story to the students. I felt that they should know why this story, instead of some other story, had been assigned.

I had always tried to interest students in reading. In fact, I had frequently brought some book into the classroom and tried to interest them in it by telling them a little about the book. I had planned elaborate displays of book jackets for the classroom bulletin board, distributed book lists and even planned trips to the library. At other times, I had tried to force some into reading by calling for book reports and by having them keep a reading record. However, when a reading assignment was made, I had told them to do it in the same manner in which the practice teacher had just made his assignment. Instead of trying to interest students in the reading, I had given it to them as if it were a task to complete.

Another weakness that I noted in the simple procedure of making a reading assignment came to me as I sat there watching the proceedings. The class had just completed a unit on improved reading. We had had a film and I had
tried to point out methods by which they could read more efficiently. We had discussed the various ways of reading, depending upon the purpose. I felt that the students could do this assignment better if they knew the purpose for which they were reading. However, they did not know if a general discussion had been planned for the following day, or if they would be required to take a comprehensive examination on the story. They did not know if they were to be responsible for a detailed account of the events that took place, or a detailed understanding of and familiarity with the characters in the story. The students had been told what to do. If only they had been told why to do it and how to do it, far more could have been accomplished and it would have been much more meaningful to them.

Answers—but Lack of Discussion

On the following day I cleared off my desk once more and retired to the back of the room. I did not take any papers to correct this time, and I went far more willingly than I had the day before. I watched with great interest as the class came to order and the planned discussion period began. By the end of the period I had made several mental notes to myself which I was sure would enable me to be a better teacher.

The first question of the period emphasized an important educational doctrine which I resolved to adhere to more closely. When the practice teacher said, "What did you think of the story?" pandemonium reigned. Various opinions were expressed simultaneously, some to the teacher and some to fellow students. Some of my own questioning had been of the same general nature, and had accomplished nothing. However, order was soon restored and more specific questions followed. Better order was maintained with such questions as, "Why did the boys want to go on a trip?" and "How far did the boys travel on the first day?" Hands were dutifully raised, students were called upon, and the answers were given. The forty-two minutes allotted to the study of English elapsed and the students filed out. Looking back on the period, it was obvious to all that no discussion had taken place. The questions had been asked, the answers had been given and another assignment had been completed. If the students had learned anything, I couldn't be sure just what it was.

Need To Clarify Objectives

I tried to understand why this period I had just observed had contributed nothing to the students. I concluded that the main reason was our failure to suit the methods to the objective. We had meant to carry on a discussion during the period, but the questions which had been asked did not lead to that objective. Upon deeper consideration, I wondered if carrying on a discussion could be considered a justifiable objective. As I thought about it, I recognized that we must plan more carefully and less superficially.

The true objective was not a discussion in this case. What we were really interested in was what could be accomplished by a period of discussion. We had really wanted the students to think about the story, and had wanted to show them how they could draw infer-
ences from various phrases and incidents in the story. Furthermore, we had wanted to give them an opportunity to express themselves before a group, and enable them to make this expression clear and concise. Because we had not clarified in our own minds what we were striving for, we had failed miserably in reaching that goal. The practice teacher had pointed out for me more vividly than any education course had ever done, the necessity of proper objectives for teaching.

During another class period conducted by the practice teacher, I made a tabulation which proved to be enlightening. I decided to do this because I felt that he was not pacing the period properly. The children were restless and I sensed that something was causing us to bog down. After the tabulation was completed, it was easy to see what the difficulty had been. According to my count, exactly fifteen answers given by students had been repeated by the practice teacher. A few of these repetitions were justified, perhaps for the purpose of summation, but most of them were merely rephrasings. Five of the repeated answers were useful in enabling the rest of the students to hear what had been said.

However, we are supposed to be teaching children to express themselves in public. If we fail to insist that the students speak loudly enough for all to hear, I wonder if we are teaching toward this objective. Perhaps my education courses had failed to teach me that I was not supposed to repeat students’ answers. However, I must admit that it is an easy rut to fall into, and I was glad that the practice teacher had reminded me of the importance of this matter.

**Improving Teaching of Writing**

After a few days of working together, the practice teacher and I had to admit that we had shown a few weaknesses in the teaching of literature. However we both felt fairly competent to teach written expression. In the course of several discussions we agreed that the bulk of instruction should be functional. We designed several written exercises that were answers to questions and decided, for the present at least, to avoid creative writing. We felt that most of the writing the children were actually doing was of an explanatory nature and we wanted to help them as much as we could with this type of writing. We made sure the students understood just what we wanted, and then set them to work on their writing in the classroom where we could help them as they worked. That part of the program worked out very nicely.

The following day we brought to class the corrected papers of the previous day. The practice teacher had planned to use some of the class period to point out to the students the most common errors found in their writing. I sat back and watched him go to work. After indicating some of the errors, the practice teacher explained the punctuation rules which applied. The papers were then returned, and the students looked through them. The practice teacher next took up the study of vocabulary, using a story which had been read previously. Then and there I saw that we had missed again. The teaching of grammar had been functional, the ex-
Explanations had been clearly made, but the students had not been given an opportunity to practice. It is true that they would be writing again in a few days, but they were certain to forget the grammatical instruction before they had a chance to use it once more. We should have planned a practice period so the students could use the information that they had received. Furthermore, we should have planned a brief review of it the following day, and then more of the students could be expected to remember it when the opportunity again occurred.

During the six weeks the practice teacher was with me, we both worked to correct our weaknesses. I recognized many of these as they occurred, it is true, and fully realize that I had been taught proper methods during my undergraduate training. However, we are our own worst critics and much of what we do soon becomes habitual, making it difficult for us to recognize our own faults.

Needless to say, I was startled to see that such faults existed in my methods, and I am most grateful to the practice teacher for bringing these faults to my attention. It is true that we spent extra time ironing out difficulties, discussing certain children and planning lessons. However, all the extra time that we spent together was repaid many fold by enabling me to improve my own teaching. In fact, another practice teacher is arriving in a few days, and I am eager to discover what I can learn from him.

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