

The Importance of People

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William and the Course of Study

WILLIAM hurried into the school wanting to be early on his first day. Mr. Topp, Head of the English Department, met him at the door of his classroom and requested that he step into the Office. William had been unable to attend the preschool conferences, but he knew what he would cover in his English classes and how he would teach. He was delighted that the ninth grade group was to begin the year with *The Merchant of Venice*.

"Now, Mr. Shakespeare," the Department Head said, pulling his six feet two up to look even taller and frightening William who shrank back from him, "this is the course outline."

"The what?" asked poor William, looking bewildered.

"The course outline, man. Surely in your previous teaching you used course outlines."

"Well——" William began tentatively, hating to admit his inadequacies.

"All right. All right. We haven't time for quibbling. Here it is. Now in the ninth grade we begin with *The Merchant of Venice*. You are to cover the five acts in three weeks. You are to emphasize first, the character development of the main characters; second, the plot; and third, the style of the writer and his ability to put across major concepts."

"But," objected William, "that is not at all the approach I had thought of.

You see, I wished to paint the total drama first, show how a writer takes a part of life and makes it unified—the union in partition."

"I fear you imply, sir, that you can't read simple directions. This course of study has been carefully worked out. You simply can't start with the whole play at once."

William frowned. "But why can you not, Mr. Topp?"

"Oh, for goodness sake." The tall Department Head looked impatient. "I must insist that you follow these directions since it's absolutely necessary that everyone take the examination at the same time."

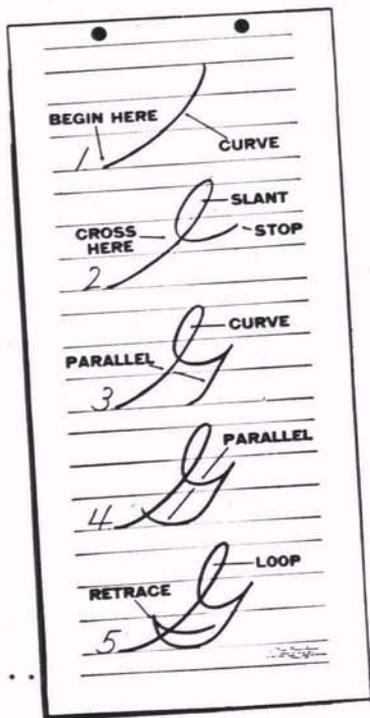
"Why is that? Are we teaching, then, for the examination?"

"Certainly not." Mr. Topp mopped his forehead. "This is the way the pupils express their knowledge."

"Hmmm. The seeming truth which cunning times put on to entrap the wisest."

"Mr. Shakespeare, I don't think you are listening. Now on this course of study, you will see that you are to give quizzes each week and to prepare for the departmental exam on Friday of three weeks hence. In this way we can be sure that every student covers the material in the same way and does his reading."

"And what do they read? Words,



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words, words. Though you are the Department Head, why must you tell me what to do, when to do it, and how? I fear this is all quite beyond me, sir. I have, perhaps, some shallow spirit of judgment."

"Mr. Shakespeare, are you questioning my authority? The reason we do this is obvious—for the good of the students."

"But is it not true that nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so?"

The Department Head took a deep breath as though to keep down his blood pressure. "I'll thank you not to quote poetry to me. Now I am only trying to explain that it is absolutely necessary that you follow the course outline as it has been set up for you."

"But, Mr. Topp, I only ask how it is that you know that this is the right way for all my students? It seems only a small question to ask." He said the last softly, looking out the window.

"I—I—oh, for goodness sake, what's the use?" Mr. Topp mopped his forehead again, seeming to fight increasing panic. "How can I let you set foot in the classroom?" he whispered.

No Profit Grows

But William was most persistent. "It always seemed, to me no profit grows, where is no pleasure ta'en. In brief, sir, study what you most affect is the right approach. If this is so, then how can it be that the course of study is predecided by the Head of the Department or anybody else? Begging your pardon, sir, but I must satisfy myself on this matter if I am to have any peace of mind with my students."

"Look, young man, let's just say this is the way we do it, and if you don't

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To most people, teaching is a process of building concepts in learners by something that others do to them. We talk to learners or require them to read someone else's talk, to remember it and to write it down. Education is dominated by definitions, by facts and answers. Early in life children thus acquire a corresponding image of teaching, learning and the school. What we can do to change our pedagogical bent, and how fast, is important to contemplate. Increasingly research and the support of accepted authority are allied with those who would try.

—MELVIN W. BARNES, *Superintendent of Schools, Portland, Oregon.*

People

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like it, perhaps you should look for another job. Now if it will make you feel better I can quote many experts who verify the fact that setting up a course of study is the only way."

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." William said softly as though to himself.

"All right. All right. Look. If all the students were at different places, if every teacher just covered what he felt like when he felt like it, the school would be in chaos. The next teacher would never know where to begin or what had been covered. It's the only wise course."

"The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool. I think it is an unwise course, and I cannot bring myself to follow it. I must let each student decide where he is and where he is going. Your course of study would preclude my doing so."

The Basic Struggle

Mr. Topp, who had obviously thought the new teacher a little stupid and rather

shy, expressed amazement at his evident resoluteness and determination. "You mean you will quit your job rather than follow what we have outlined for you? Frankly, if you will forgive me, you just don't seem that sort of fellow."

"The time of life is short; to spend that shortness basely were too long. I must to mine own self be true. I cannot confine myself to a pen which seems to have few logical reasons for being built—and certainly not the best reasons for the best interest of the students. If the next teacher does not know what my students have studied, let him ask. But let him ask each one separately, only then to pick up from there: I find no objection to the setting down of the requirement that all study *The Merchant of Venice*. But it is afterward that each teacher must move ahead by his own selection of what is best."

Mr. Topp seemed suddenly to think of a new argument. "Can you name the basic struggle of this play? Can you name the modern applications of the character and situation of Shylock? Can you name where the play has been acted and how recently? Do you know the theme?"

William shook his head sadly. He could not answer any of the questions put to him. "Aha," Mr. Topp said with sudden assurance, "you see why a course outline is necessary? These are the things which must be discussed."

"Lord, what fools these mortals be! There's more to life and *The Merchant of Venice* than this."

"Mr. Shakespeare, you are obviously unfit to teach this play. Now I regret this deeply, believe me, but I must ask for your resignation."

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