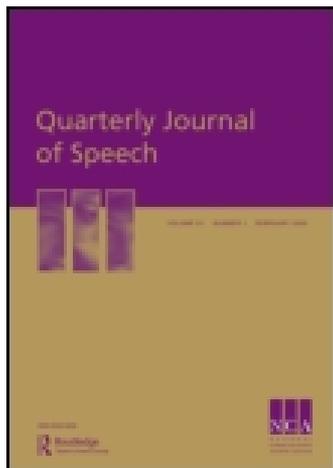


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EDUCATION THROUGH READING AND DECLAMATION¹

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MY SUBJECT has been announced as "Education Through Reading and Declamation." Let me hasten to say that I strongly believe education through the former to be not only possible, but highly essential; while I feel equally certain that the educational advantages which may be advanced for the latter activity are decidedly negative. Having thus used all my ammunition at once, I may proceed.

I desire to make clear at the outset that I shall discuss both reading and declamation in the light of the contest work done in the state. It is here that our work as teachers of expression, of academic rank, supposedly shows up, and our claims of doing an educational work may be tested. I shall advocate, not the doing away of the contest, but the displacement entirely of the non-educational declamatory for a truly educational reading contest.

I take it for granted that I address a group interested and informed in the field of speech, so I may be sure of your understanding, and your coöperation to such an extent as you are willing to concede my main contention as already stated.

As teachers of speech in some form, we are still considered by far too great a portion of the world at large as distinctly outside the educational fold. Nor are our fellow teachers, our principals, and superintendents unduly willing to admit us to the inner circle. I feel that we, ourselves, are much to blame that such should be the case, and in no way more than in what we allow to be done in this contest work. Busy and overburdened as we are, to struggle as we must for the recognition which

¹ Read at the State Teachers' Convention, Milwaukee, Wis., November 7, 1919.

we should have means effort. Too often we are not equal to it. More often, I must confess, I have found teachers in my own field who do not think it *necessary* to make the effort, but are satisfied to remain "elocution teachers." Such are, of course, willing to let the contest situation go on as it is, and avoid the struggle which its rearrangement means.

Self-expression, the development of the individual, of his personality, is the trend of our education today. In this, pedagogy and psychology are agreed. The acquiring of facts will no longer suffice. No greater opportunity is offered the student for development of personality than through the medium of vocal expression. "Of the various forms of expression, verbal expression is the most important," says Dean Parker. In a more special sense, this is still more true, and I would substitute the word *vocal* for verbal, thus covering the various activities of personality possible through the medium of the voice and body. But it will be appreciated at once that these activities must be spontaneous, to be of true educational value, and no coached performance, with memorized instruction, fully digested, will ever be able to claim place in this field.

The work being done in many schools under the name of expression is done almost entirely for the contests in which the trained and coached declaimers are to appear. Such training and coaching addressed to a selected few, presumably already gifted with a special "talent," constitutes practically all that is being done in the field of development through personal expression for the pupils committed to the care of the schools. Declamation contest seems to be the one idea. Possibly some of the faults of declamation might be obviated if it could be separated from the contest. This seems unlikely to occur. Yet, here is a medium of speech activity big with educational possibilities, given over almost entirely to an extra-curricular sphere, a coached sphere, and handled, to an alarming extent, with apparently no pedagogical consideration.

We are told that the declaimers, a selected few, gain self-confidence, ease, and poise, sometimes even grace is added to the list. Great stress is given to the fact that the memory is trained. This point will bear long and careful consideration. To forget is a crime, punishable with loss of place or points. Few

do forget, a word, a gesture, an inflection, a position, a pause, a turn of the head or even eyes, or any other minute detail which they have been crammed to remember. One cannot but be impressed, upon the *appearance* of the declaimers, with the fact that they are full of remembrances. The skill with which they deliver themselves of these memories, endeavoring faithfully to act as if the rendition were *not* memorized, viewed as an educational activity, is one of the most astounding things about the whole performance. Perhaps the spirit of "win at any cost" too often allowed, sometimes even encouraged, giving rise to certain methods of training or coaching, is largely to blame for results seen. In any case, I believe there can be little argument but that the qualities, estimable indeed, alleged to result from declaiming, need, *in every case*, to have *spontaneous* activity and self-expression if they are to become truly operative in the individual. Spontaneous activity of mind, feeling, imagination, voice, action, or even memory, cannot come through the present coached performance of the declaimer. As for the advantage of memory training urged for declamation, it is, as I have already indicated, of the most mechanical type. Even at its best there is doubt in my own mind as to the exact amount of value received. Educational psychologists now assure us that there is no proof that memory power trained in one department can be made available in another. To my mind one of the elements in our work, as teachers in the field of speech, which needs careful consideration and discussion is the place, importance, and amount, of memory work we should require. The entire educational curriculum calls for far too much memory work. Initial mental activity, training in concentration, and quick responses to sequence of thought and emotion, elements vitally necessary to the development of the individual, are not developed and trained as they should be. Extemporaneous speaking and expressive or interpretative oral reading have possibilities in these directions, declamation few if any. An excellent article, "The Curse of Memory," by W. A. Neilson, President of Smith College, appeared in the *English Journal* for February, 1917. It offers many valuable suggestions.

Before discussing the values of expressive reading and the desirability of having such a contest supplant the present de-

clamatory one, it is necessary to understand the way the word "declamatory" is used. There are two contests in vogue, one termed declamatory and the other oratorical. The dictionary definitions of the words "declaim," "declamatory," and "declamation" are extremely clear. To declaim is "to recite a speech, poem, etc., in public as an elocutionary exercise." This then becomes a "declamation." To recite is "to repeat before an audience something prepared and committed to memory." From these definitions there would seem no conceivable reason for two contests captioned as above. All material in both, as at present conducted, is recited in public as an elocutionary exercise. Something prepared and committed to memory is repeated before an audience. The only differences, then, between the two would seem to be arbitrary ones: the nature of the material declaimed, speeches for the one, and general literature for the other, and the limiting of the contestants, very largely girls to the general literature, and boys to the speeches. Both terms as at present used, are I believe, misnomers. Further confusion frequently occurs, as last year when the winner of the so called "oratorical" contest used material which by no stretch of imagination could be called oratorical, and did a piece of work so splendidly belonging in the category of expressive and interpretative reading, that had he appeared with the contestants who were giving material in that form, he would have overtopped them all. His material was not addressed *to* the audience, it was interpreted *for* them. The first is the function of speech forms, the second of interpretative forms.

In general, the contest in which speech material is used, termed "oratorical," gives, it seems to me, the better results. (Remember, I am thinking of both as having educational values.) There are reasons for this which have nothing to do with the abilities of the contestants. There is more agreement among teachers of public speaking with regard to an acceptable form of delivery for speeches than for interpretative work. Therefore, the coaching is less objectionable. There are more people capable of giving approximately wise suggestion on the choice of speech material and upon the delivery of the same. As a result again, better judging is likely to result. And lastly, there is a better choice of material in this form, though this should not

be true as the body of literature capable of interpretation is vast in comparison.

I do not approve of the oratorical declaiming contest as an educational activity for the reasons already indicated. I believe every effort should be made to supplant it with extempore speech or discussion contests, in which both boys and girls may participate. As for the other contest, termed "declamatory," I would have it supplanted by an expressive reading contest with the material not entirely memorized and the text always present.

Such crimes as are committed against the cause of education in the "declamatory" contest would seem to me to call down the wrath of the gods upon all acquiescing heads. What possible values to the individual can be claimed for the rendition, good or bad, of some such specimens of hopeless bathos and melodrama as "Inja," "Bobby Shaftoe," "The Soul of Violin," and any number of others? As teachers of speech, expression, English, or whatever, we surely are aware that this material is full of untruths, impossible characters and situations, and is written by authors of little ability or literary power. If there were no other reason to plead for the replacing of declamation with reading contests other than the betterment of material, it would be sufficient, and that result would be immediate.

I have not time here to go into a discussion of the problems of reading, the methods of teaching it in the grades, where reading aloud should begin or end, or any similar phases of the subject, nor does it seem pertinent to our discussion. Since all the literature of the world is available, a vast storehouse of material for re-creation, participation, revelation, I would say expressive reading aloud should begin early and continue throughout the student's entire course and after. Jane Addams says, "The person of the highest culture is the one who is able to put himself in the place of the greatest number of other persons." The activity of the sympathetic rendering of literature makes possible this culture. It may also claim as truly educational a wider knowledge of better literature and the spontaneous re-creation, participation, and revelation of the same. If you reply all this is equally possible in declamation, I say again, the powers developed in the individual personality in order that spontaneous re-creation may occur as the eye drops to the page, catching the phrases as if for

the first time while the voice and body respond in sympathetic suggestive presentation, are quite different from those we see developed as a result of declaiming.

You will note that I have used sparingly the terms "expressive reading," interpretative reading," etc. They seem misunderstood even in our own profession. Oral reading we know at least is not silent reading. A teacher of expression not long ago asked me, "When you say interpretative reading, do you mean reading or do you memorize it?" I mean reading when I say so, having the book before one and no memorized remembrance, necessarily, of any paragraph or stanza. The lines are not there lest we forget, but as the material with which we are dealing. Professor Dowden's remarks in his *New Studies in Literature*, as to what may constitute desirable expressive reading, though well known will bear repeating at this time. He says: "Few persons nowadays seem to feel how powerful an instrument of culture may be found in modest, intelligent, and sympathetic reading aloud. A mongrel something which, at least with the inferior adepts, is neither good reading nor veritable acting, but which sets agape the half-educated with the wonder of its airs and attitudinizings, its pseudo-heroics and pseudo-pathos, has usurped the place of the true art of reading aloud, and has made the word recitation a terror to quiet folk who are content with intelligence and refinement. The reading which we should desire to cultivate is intelligent reading, that is, it should express the meaning of each passage clearly; sympathetic reading, that is, it should convey the feeling delicately (namely suggestively); musical reading, that is, it should move in accord with the melody and harmony of what is read be it verse or prose."

I have been much interested in articles by a person entirely outside our field of teaching but one who senses our problems with clearest insight. I refer to two articles in particular, "Poetry, Imagination, and Education" by Amy Lowell, which appeared in the *North American Review*, and "Poetry as a Spoken Art" by the same author, which appeared in the *Dial*. In the latter article she says: "In reading, one is all alone, and one must not act. I do not mean that one should not read with expression. I mean that it is more dangerous to overdo dramatic expression than to underdo it. Reading is not acting, and the point cannot

be too strongly insisted upon. The pitfall of all elocution-taught readers is that they fail to see this distinction. Great readers do not make this mistake, it is the little people who are not sure of their power of creating an effect by an inflection, who fall into the error. Again, the reader must not be confused with the impersonator. [One of the commonest faults in our declaiming.] Impersonators act out their parts, although they are all alone upon the stage. They are approaching the brains of their audiences from the same standpoint as the actor. They are acting in fact. In reading, the impression to be made upon an audience is achieved by quite other means. Here the audience must see nothing with its eyes which detracts from its mental vision. It must be made to imagine so vividly that it forgets the reader in the thing read. The dramatic quality of the piece must be given just in so far as it stimulates imagination, but never so far as to call attention to the reader as an actual personality." [No better statement can be made with regard to the meaning of "expressive reading."]

I have tried to show that in the methods of preparation, and in the activity of revelation, as well as in the nature of the material used, the declamatory contests can lay little claim to any truly educational values or results. And I have tried to show further that could such a contest be replaced with one of interpretative oral reading, the pupil's expressive faculties would be alert and active; that their functioning would be of a spontaneous and creative type; and that their powers of personality would be developed in a truly educational manner. Further the type of material would be infinitely improved as well as the methods of choosing it.

May I call to the attention of those who may not be familiar with the book, J. B. Kerfoot's *How to Read*, by far the best book on the subject I have ever read. I quote in closing: "We have nothing to read with except our own experience—the seeing and hearing and smelling and tasting and touching that we have done; the fearing and hoping and hating and loving that has happened in us; the intellectual and spiritual reactions that have resulted; and the assumptions, understandings, prides, prejudices, hypocrisies, fervors, foolishnesses, finenesses, and faiths that have thereby been precipitated in us like crystals in a chemist's tube."