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THE ROLE OF SPEECH IN EDUCATION: A RE-EVALUATION

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IN the present chaotic state of the world, the problem of preserving peace and of establishing unity among nations is causing each one of us great concern, for unless peace is secured and harmony in the world order established our current civilization will be utterly destroyed. The problem of preserving democracy is likewise one in which we have a keen interest, for democracy is a way of life which we have found satisfying and wholesome, and which we do not want to lose. We cannot take the democratic concept for granted, for it is being challenged on all sides. In spite of this challenge we believe in it and the democratic processes for, guided by the concept and following the processes we, as teachers, can obtain the greatest good for the greatest number.

Democracy is based on the worth, dignity, and right of the individual. As a result, its greatest strength lies in the potentialities of its citizens; its very life is derived from the wisdom of the individuals who are its constituents.

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Every person living within the boundaries of a democracy is guaranteed the privilege of freedom of speech and freedom of discussion. With the acceptance of this privilege, each individual assumes the responsibility to use freedom of speech to support democratic principles and to uphold democratic values, for in the use of this privilege he plays an important part in the formulation of public opinion, which, in turn, is a significant factor in determination of local, state, and national policy.

Because democracy is based on the right of the individual, a democratic society is committed to the task of providing education for everyone. There is, therefore, in the United States a system of universal education. It is only logical to assume that an education so conceived should prepare everyone to the full extent of his ability for participation in the life of that society. It should first of all prepare a man to earn a living. Second, it should provide opportunities and the necessary resources for him to develop a 'well furnished mind.' Third, it should aid him in the cultivation of the power to think: to reason, to investigate, to test new ideas, to evolve new concepts, to make decisions on the basis of pertinent data, to distin-

guish fact and opinion, to analyze propaganda, to form sound judgments, to build worthy values, and to solve problems. Fourth, it should foster with great care the development of articulate human beings, who are aware of their moral accountability for any ideas expressed. Fifth, it should cultivate within the individual a social consciousness and responsibility, as well as develop the ability to cooperate with others and to recognize the rights of others. Sixth, it should cultivate the creative and appreciative talents. Seventh, it should help the individual to formulate estimable moral values. Eighth, it should provide the means for discovering those individuals who are endowed with the special qualifications for leadership, and also provide the experiences which will enable the potential leaders to grow to the fullest of their capacity.

If, through education in a democracy, each member of its society could achieve his maximum growth in relation to all the objectives just set forth, there would be produced, indeed, an historical period of sound government with a good social order.

I am not one who believes that speech education is synonymous with all education, but I believe sincerely that we have a contribution to make to general education that is real, vital, and absolutely essential. But—have we been so concerned with a narrow area of specialization that we have neglected the larger purposes? Have we made as thorough, as comprehensive, as complete a contribution as possible? It might be profitable to pause and consider certain phases of our teaching in the light of the broader outlook.

Are we teaching public speaking, debate, and discussion with reference to present-day society, or are we bound by tradition? In teaching the Aristotelian

theory and in analyzing speeches according to that theory, we have stood staunchly by subject matter that is scholarly and that has a noble history. However, in so doing have we given our students the proper perspective of present-day speaking? Have we failed to arouse an adventurous spirit, which might search for and find new theories more appropriate for twentieth century communication? Have we inspired those in our classrooms to experiment with new forms of democratic inter-action? Just recently President Conant, of Harvard, redefined 'the history of science,' the general acceptance of which has been set for many, many years. Yet President Conant enlarged the concept and forced scientists to readjust their thinking. Should we not follow the example, re-examine our thinking, and encourage research in and experimentation with new theories and new forms of oral communication?

In the teaching of debate, are the affirmative and negative sides of a question stressed to such an extent that the student loses sight of the many sides of an issue? I do not wish, by this question, to imply that debate is not a worthy subject. I believe in it and must honestly say that one of the most valued courses I ever had the privilege of taking was one in argumentation. However, if a student is to realize and accept his social responsibilities, and to take part in the consideration of current social, economic, and political problems he must be fully aware of all sides of an issue and of the processes of thought which lead men to adhere to one of the many sides.

Is discussion being taught as an end in itself or is it being taught as a means of securing group thinking, of testing the validity of an individual's and a group's reasoning, of bringing to light all sides of a question, of developing judgment and values, of bringing about reasoned

action on definite problems? Are we striving to obtain all the educational results which may accrue from cooperative group thinking on a problem? It has been said many times that open and free discussion by the people is the safeguard of our freedom. Should we not put forth all our efforts to contribute to the preservation of our freedom?

Recently a bibliography on methods of teaching compiled by a specialist in higher education came into my hands. It was a surprise to find on the list the titles of two books on group discussion written by members of the SPEECH ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA. In the educational atmosphere one hears considerable talk about oral discussion as *the* method of teaching. An analysis of the methods of teaching advocated by Hutchins and by Dewey—men who are supposed to be at opposite ends of the pole so far as method of teaching is concerned—shows that both educators are committed to oral discussion as the most profitable way of learning. Both stress the values to be gained from the interplay of minds through oral discussion. Although teachers on all levels are being urged to use group discussion as the best means of motivating and assuring learning, the question arises as to how many teachers are prepared to use discussion as a teaching technique. Are we doing everything that we should do to provide opportunities for teachers in service and prospective teachers to learn the techniques necessary for participation in and for leadership of discussion?

Although in some areas we seem to have been bound too closely to tradition, in others we seem to have disregarded it and to have travelled far afield. This is particularly true in the area of the spoken language *per se*. In our language we have received a rich heritage. Have we preserved that heritage? No one can

deny that language is constantly growing and changing and that we must accept changes and adapt to them. However, in accepting legitimate changes, it is not necessary to accept slovenly speech. In our present society, speech—or oral language—is the most widely used medium for communication. Moreover, an individual's speech is an outward manifestation of his whole cultural background. Have we paid sufficient attention to these two facts?

Dean Pollock, of New York University, is reported to have said, at the recent meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English that English teachers needed to remember that 'good usage varied with time and place.'¹ That undoubtedly is true, but what we, as teachers of speech, need to remember is that while the vocabulary used to express an idea may change, the essentials of voice and articulation should not change. In our educational program provision should be made for every individual to develop, not what is commonly known as standard speech, but pleasant voice quality, and clear-cut articulation which will serve him in any situation. Audible, intelligent, and pleasant speech is necessary for satisfactory communication. It is also the right of every individual to have the best speech possible, in order to present himself adequately and truly to other individuals. Other nations take pride in speaking their native tongue with clarity and precision, but we just do not care. Is it not worth the effort involved to create among American citizens some pride and self-respect in speaking the language so that its natural quality of excellence will be maintained?

Individual speech sounds in American English have distinct qualities which are powerful in arousing psychological responses. Certain sounds, combined to form a word, can evoke certain feelings.

If sounds are distorted, omitted, or slurred, that power is lost or weakened. Furthermore, if individuals are not made aware of sounds and their psychological value, they have indeed been deprived of a rich heritage, for they cannot fully appreciate great literature in which sound values are used deliberately by writers to carry emotional connotation and to create certain rhythmic movements.

Perhaps educators have tended to slight the aesthetic aspects of our language because of the emphasis placed in this industrial age on the practical and the utilitarian. Have we stressed the utilitarian use of speech to the point where we have failed to focus attention on the fact that speech is a tool for the expression and communication of thought and that speech and thought are closely related? Have we done all that we can do through the teaching of speech to develop powers of thinking so that there may be an increasing intelligent citizenry in this country? To be able to think logically and to express ideas clearly and logically is undoubtedly one of the greatest assets any individual can have, regardless of the type of work in which he is engaged, and a thinking, articulate populace is the strongest foundation any democratic society can have.

The ability to think and speak logically must be accompanied by the power to analyze critically the spoken word as it impinges upon the ear—to distinguish statements of fact and opinion, to identify false assumptions, to detect fallacious reasoning. Arnold J. Toynbee, in his book, *A Study of History*, decries universal education and states that one of its greatest weaknesses is that the masses are only half educated, and so susceptible to a 'debased system of propaganda' on the part of the 'press lords,' 'modern

dictators,' the radio, and the movies. He sets forth his idea in the following figure of speech: 'The bread of universal education is no sooner cast upon the waters than a shoal of sharks arises from the depths and devours the children's bread under the educator's very eyes.'² It is true that in our democratic society many people are not well enough educated to analyze disseminated information and to distinguish right and wrong propaganda, and some do not have the capacity for exercising such mental powers, but many people, by far the majority, are able and should be educated so that they can function as intelligent listeners and critics. Because of the very nature of our chosen field of endeavor, we have within our sphere of influence many opportunities to contribute to and raise the level of the individual's thinking power and analytical efficiency.

'Man does not live by bread alone,' is an old maxim but a very true one. Every individual has certain aesthetic needs, so he must have moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values to sustain him at all times. Have we put forth as much effort as we can to develop appreciation and to provide opportunities for creative expression in the fields of the theater and in oral interpretation of literature? Probably no country in the world has spent more money than the United States on art, music, theatre, and motion pictures, yet the level of appreciation is not so high as it should be or as it might be. With increased industrialization in our culture, there is and will be more time for leisure. If this time is to be spent profitably, the innate need of every individual for creative release and for aesthetic satisfaction must be aroused and cultivated. Is it not possible to extend the educational program in dramatics and oral interpretation so that every person wishing to participate in some

phase of the art forms may do so? The desire to create and to appreciate is not a special gift granted to a talented few, but is in every young child. As the child grows, it may be suppressed and remain latent, and if such is the case it is our task to motivate, to arouse, and to cultivate this innate desire. Not only will we be contributing to the well-being and happiness of the individual, but we will be contributing to the welfare of the

nation, for when the arts are at a high level, the spiritual welfare of a civilization is at a high level.

The task before us is tremendous. To achieve fully will require the best efforts of all of us. Can we go forward with a faith in the democratic way of life, with a sincere belief in the worth of speech education and with a zeal for making the greatest possible contribution to our democratic society?

¹ *Time*, 8 December 1947, 69.

² Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*,

abridged by D. C. Somervell (New York, 1947)
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