

Dr. Abbott as Teacher

by R. S. Conway† from the *Manchester Guardian*

Others than professional teachers or students of education may desire to hear something of the way in which Dr. Abbott handled a class. If any of my own pupils read these lines they will see at once the source from which I have learnt what I try to practise. If space permitted it would be a delightful task to describe the proceedings of a whole day with “the doctor,” but I must be content to illustrate only two points from recollections which are still vivid. The two were almost inseparably associated in his mind — (1) to leave no stone unturned in the quest of full and precise truth up to the limit of certain knowledge, distinguishing it sharply from matters only probable; and (2) to make the quest a pursuit or, if the word be permitted, a game in which the whole class could join all the time and every time, each member of it to the full extent of his capacity. The truth did indeed make us free from much superstition, especially from unthinking convention or respectable but unenlightened interpretations. But it bound us at the same moment slaves to the common interest of the class. One of Abbott’s commonest methods of dealing with a muddled answer was to turn another boy and bid him repeat the explanation given; and when it appeared that the muddle had produced still worse a muddle in the second boy’s mind, Abbott’ would look back to the first boy and say, “You see how far you have made him understand.” If a clever boy at the top gave an answer which was correct but too brief or technically worded to be readily understood, he would say, “Yes, yes, all very well; but think of the boys down there at the bottom.” When Jones made a mistake in the construing, Abbott would turn sharply and say, “Correct that, Brown,” and when, as often happened, Brown produced a merely satisfactory version which did not make clear where Jones had gone wrong, Abbott would say: “No, no, what was his mistake? Tell him his mistake.” A boy who is conscious of a difficulty often rather inclines to mutter instead of speaking plain, on which Abbott would say, “Don’t drop your voice; you are sure to go wrong if you drop your voice,” a playful inversion of the facts which delighted the class and at the same time braced the stammerer to a clearer effort.

For ignorance which was natural he had the fullest consideration; no one was ever blamed for not knowing an out-of-the-way word or construction. We used to render Homer at sight,

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and Abbott, though he must have read through Homer many times, would always choose a passage with which he had for some length of time been unfamiliar. When the construer stopped in distress he would say, "Now, what's your difficulty? Such and such a word? Good; now let's see what we can find out about it." Forthwith every method of grammar, common sense, and the finest literary taste was brought to bear to solve the riddle. But it must not be solved too soon. He would say sometimes, "Very good; there are three possibilities suggested, we will see later if we can choose between them." This habit of suspending judgment until we found convincing evidence was perhaps one of the things he was most anxious to teach us; and very often he would deliberately end the lesson leaving unsolved certain questions of grammar or ancient custom. "We have done enough for today," he would say; "we have made out the meaning of this piece."

None of us will ever forget those construing lessons. To say they were interesting is nothing; they were keenly exciting. He nearly always walked up and down the room, and when a boy in construing approached a serious difficulty he would balance his little figure finely upon the tips of his heels, slightly swaying with controlled eagerness, and listening intently. If the boy faced the difficulty and got through, the soles of his feet would come down rapping the floor smartly. "Good!" he exclaimed; and we all felt one summit of the mountain had been safely crossed.

I might add much more, but perhaps enough has been said to indicate some of Dr. Abbott's methods. The extraordinary power of his teaching, both for knowledge and for life, is a thing to be reverently remembered, but can hardly be described.