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Author(s): Violet Edwards

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DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH MOTION PICTURES AND NEWSPAPERS

VIOLET EDWARDS[†]

This afternoon I want to describe, at least in part, specifically what is being done this year in a number of English classes to further the development of critical thinking through use of the motion picture and the newspaper. The classes I have in mind are "run of the mill" public school English classes; they exceed fifty in number; they range from sixth grade through the junior and senior high schools in such diverse locales and communities as Manhasset, Long Island; Elkhart, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; New York City; Hackensack, New Jersey; Glendale, California; and Denver, Colorado.

A number of the teachers of these classes worked together last summer for six weeks in a first and experimental propaganda-analysis workshop course. This course was conducted by Professor Clyde R. Miller, who was assisted by the staff of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis and by several of the Institute's co-operating teachers; it was given at Teachers College, Columbia University. In its small registration of less than thirty persons there were represented not only many geographical, sectional, and community differences but also great differences of educational philosophy and practice. The group was divided almost equally into the subject-matter fields of English and of the social studies. I hasten to point out that these very factors stimulated and enriched our course—our group-discussion and work conferences. Indeed, our attention was focused upon re-examination of the learning process itself. Not only did the teachers of English form a working group of their own, but they helped to organize a curriculum committee for the express purpose of appraising various uses of the newspaper, the motion picture, and the radio in the English classroom. They recognized a very real need to examine critically the content of their English and social studies

[†] Educational Director of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, New York City. This paper was read at the New York convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 24, 1939.

courses in the light of today's knowledge of (1) basic personal needs of young people as individuals interacting with their social-psychological environment, especially as this environment is shaped by newspapers and by movies, and (2) contemporary society and its possible trends.

I have taken several valuable minutes in which to give a hasty—very far from complete—frame of reference for some of the techniques, some of the methods and generalizations developed by this group of teachers in their use of movies and newspapers to increase individual and group ability to think critically. I wish some of these teachers were here today to give you graphic pictures of their classrooms at work.

Since this discussion is concerned primarily with “setting the stage” for developing critical thinking through practical and intelligent uses of motion pictures and newspapers, it is essential to define the term lest it become one more glittering generality. I am using “critical thinking,” as an expression of the scientific method, to mean in the words of Dr. S. P. McCutchen:

One who faces the social situation intelligently:

1. Defines or describes the problem correctly,
2. Looks at the feasible courses of action,
3. Collects and interprets the pertinent information,
4. Reaches a tentative decision in the light of the evidence,
5. Acts in accordance with the decision, and
6. Reconstructs his patterns on the basis of his experience.

Such a process is necessary to the maintenance and development of our democratic society. In this process propaganda analysis, the building of effective techniques for thinking critically, is a means to an end—the participation by the common man in the solution of the major problems of his own life and of our American society. (A word of caution: Too frequently educators have grown to consider semantics, critical thinking, or problem-solving as ends in themselves.)

You will, I believe, want to keep in mind both the objectives and the process of critical thinking as I give some of the generalizations and conclusions which grew out of our summer conferences. Chief among these are:

1. It is not enough merely to have in mind in our work with motion pictures and newspapers the goal of “developing critical-

mindedness" in general terms. This goal must be made specific in terms of (a) our pupils' interests, needs, and values; (b) our pupils' age and maturity levels; and (c) our pupils' home and community environments and demands.

2. To insure our being guided by the maturity levels and interests of our pupils—to prevent as far as possible teacher-propelled study of movies and newspapers—let us painstakingly encourage pupil planning and discussion of the project and its objectives. In other words, we are recognizing in practice that

3. Children and young people must not be forced, or stirred emotionally, to face problems about which they can do nothing. Their use of movies and newspapers, then, will not superimpose problems upon them which are not legitimately their own problems. In our experimental work we have found that many of the concepts from the movies are too adult for most ten-year-old children and, for that matter, for many junior high school pupils. (For example, race problems do not usually become personal until adolescence; Negro and white children play together until they are eleven or twelve.) When children take up such mature problems the outcomes are frequently far different from the ones we teachers seek. For example, a study of war—in motion pictures—may set up in the young child a fear that his father will be killed in a war. The study of family living based on movie material may, in children not mature enough for such study, set up a fear that parents will get a divorce. In any case these are problems which children cannot solve; they are adult problems.

Young adults in senior high schools are, of course, and rightfully, concerning themselves with many aspects of such problems, particularly with the threatening news from Europe. Recognizing that all our channels of communication are organized to give the American public last-minute news of the war, these boys and girls and their teachers, following the day-by-day accounts of a series of crises, have been able to study newspapers, newsreels, and radio. Many groups, having begun their study with the Munich crisis, have studied recent news from Europe as the latest of a series of crises; many newspaper, magazine, and movie reports and interpretations have been available for their study. They report that the motion pictures *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Juarez* have been of particular value. They have searched for the "story back of the news." They

know that news must come over a cable or over the air through facilities subject to the censor's control; they know that reporters and editors handle the news with all the human frailties, biases, and peculiarities which an army of correspondents have pointed out in such volumes as *Personal History* and *Behind the News*.

Many of these groups are accompanying their study of European war news with an examination of one or more domestic conflicts which have gained consistent space in the press, for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the handling of the two situations by the newspaper, the newsreel, the radio. Reports from co-operating teachers and students working in this field reveal that evaluation of outcomes of their study is easier when they state their objectives in terms of changes in student behavior. For example: He (the pupil) knows when the editor has placed a story on page 2. He reads the news columns and then sees if the headline is misleading. He can explain what stereotypes are appealed to in a movie. He is willing to work for and with others while thinking and deciding for himself. Parenthetically, I wish to point out that many of the teachers of these groups keep a log or diary account of group and class discussions.

4. The study of the newspaper (and, to a slightly lesser extent, the motion picture) is not a specific part of information or skill which belongs to any particular level. It is something which permeates the life of children as well as of adults. All of us, from the kindergarten stage through the college level, need to become articulate about our experiences. Presumably that is why we have English courses.

5. Young people of junior high school age, our experimental work shows, can think critically about many things related to the movies and at the same time retain an enjoyment of current films that is the right of all persons. They can, for example, learn to select motion pictures on the basis of more consideration of values than merely the presence of a favorite "star" in the cast. They can examine critically the differences between advertisements, advertising "story copy," and genuine news stories about films and film people. Moreover, since many have read the books—books and stories ranging from *Heidi*, *Snow White*, and *The Wizard of Oz* to *Drums along the Mo-*

hawk and *Mill on the Floss*—they can learn to ask: Were the stories like the movies? Where do differences occur? Why were changes made? They can effectively carry on study of light, color, sound, and dramatic technique, thus increasing their ability to appreciate motion pictures. With wise guidance they may also ask: What was the purpose of this particular picture (it may be *Zola* or *Abraham Lincoln* or *A President Vanishes*). At the present time a senior high school group is doing a most interesting experimental study in the classification of movie “stills” according to certain common propaganda devices such as name-calling, transfer, plain folks, and glittering generalities. They procured the “stills” from their local motion-picture theater whose manager was eager to supply them.

Let us pause here to emphasize that especially in the vital fields of modern communication English class work should be built around the interests of the boys and girls themselves in movies or in newspapers or in radio. Remember our pupils themselves can best indicate where their real interests lie. If Tarzan movie serials or Walter Winchell’s column or the “funnies” were the fields of their greatest interest, then study of these should be the basis of work in beginning critical study for the class. This study will lead to a wider range of experiences.

Many of our last summer’s group have found it worth while to read a great deal about child and adolescent psychology while listening to the accounts of the movie likes and dislikes which their young people give. Childhood and youth have their own values, and probably too frequently we have failed to respect their personalities by imposing our own ideas upon them at too early an age. We respect men and women of all classes, races, and creeds in our democratic society. Let us add to this, respect for young people as young people. In our study of motion pictures and newspapers let us start with the child or the young person in his world of fantasy which he enjoys so much and understand what he is thinking, feeling, and enjoying and then act as a guide, but permit him to travel his own road to maturity.

However, it is well to ask: Do we know what are the honest interests of our boys and girls? Possibly even if we think we do, we should devote considerable time to listening to their free discussions of their

special interests, to encouraging them to express in writing their genuine interests in the movies and in the newspapers. Then we can work more effectively in and through these interests. Methods of free group discussion, including the Town Hall technique, contribute to the functional study of movies and newspapers; certainly they have their place in the English class. And so, too, have the informal diary or letter or column or scenario—all forms of organized expression. Good old-fashioned practice in writing, in careful organization of one's thoughts, is in itself a road to clearer thinking.

The teacher's basic concern, then, in the use of motion pictures and newspapers for developing critical thinking is in the continuous development in each child at his rate of growth, of the ability to organize his experiences and so build generalizations out of those experience—all to the end that each child is better able to meet the next experience. And in this task our first axiom must be: We are not teaching English; nor are we teaching critical thinking; we are teaching young people. We are teaching fifteen-year-old Mary, whose head is filled with the "cardboard lovers" of the screen; we are teaching William, whose Horatio Alger pattern of success through acquiring personal wealth is taken from Hollywood. I know a teacher who was wise enough to begin with William's Horatio Alger dream; it was not long before William was reading and discussing Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities*. Thus, for him and for his schoolmates new vistas for collective achievement in rebuilding his home town, for providing greater facilities for recreation, better homes, and the like, have opened. This teacher did not impose her own standards of what is "good" or "bad" in the movies upon her young people.

Like her, we have a far more useful and significant task: the finding of vital things in our pupils' lives with which we can work, linking up these with the required subject matter of our so-called traditional or progressive courses. For this task we can find no more practical and pertinent vehicles than the newspaper and the motion picture, permeating as they do the lives of all of us.

If we concern ourselves with this task we may be sure that we will not have a classroom of youngsters who saw in *Zola* not a powerful story of the rights of free speech but pro-Jewish propaganda. Nor

will we develop in girls and boys a spurious kind of cynicism which says in effect, "You can't believe anything you read in the papers; it's all propaganda."

READING MADE FASHIONABLE

ROWENA C. DRAKE¹

In our continuous search for new ways of creating interest in books and extensive voluntary reading the biennial book exhibit has been one of our happiest discoveries. As an ever new and evolving form of activity it seems to renew the interest of the entire high school as well as to arouse the enthusiasm of each class that undertakes its management. It has led a sort of Topsy-like growth from the first informal exhibit, managed by a Junior English class, to the last somewhat elaborate and extensive achievement of an enthusiastic Freshman group.

It was initiated by a group of Juniors inspired by an exhibit of books for small children which was sponsored by the public library and a collaborating bookshop, for the purpose of guiding bewildered mothers and aunts in the wise selection of books for Christmas. When I tentatively suggested a rival book show for the high school, one of the Juniors remarked, "I'll say our relatives certainly need 'guidance' in selecting our books for Christmas. What do you suppose my aunt gave me last Christmas? A perfectly *bee-utiful* volume of Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*."

Louise is one of several in her class who have voluntarily read nearly all the plays of Shakespeare that are ever read by anyone except an English teacher and, having taken part in two Shakespearean productions, loves to quote the lines like a veteran actor of the old school.

Louise's remark precipitated a somewhat scornful discussion of literary white elephants presented for past Christmases, which I interrupted with the question: "Not to be inquisitive, but just how do you select new books for yourself?"

¹ Teacher of English in the Sunset Hill School for Girls, Kansas City, Mo.