

History Teachers' Forum

TRIED AND TRUE GOALS

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There was at one time, in another state, a graduate student from a country of the Far East, who enrolled in my course in American party history. At the end of the session, he did not seem to know much about the leaders in our party history. Neither did he know much about the parties that have developed and played their parts in the government of our country. Near the close of the summer, he informed me that he knew little more at the beginning of the course than the names of Washington, Hamilton and Jefferson. He was telling me the literal truth, and I was forced to conclude, that, measured by the distance he had traveled from the day he entered my class, he had done about as well as any other student. I will hazard the guess, too, that he has since added much to his knowledge of American history, the institutions of the country, and the place of parties in the scheme of democratic government in the modern world. What Sugiyami was able to do in the summer of 1927, with almost no foundation whatever to build on, furnishes a subject for reflection.

Every teacher of history knows how imperfect the knowledge and understanding of a period can be for many high school and college students after they have labored through a course. Students frequently declare that they know little in a short time after completing almost any course, and they are usually ready to add that they will soon know less. Many throw up their hands and ask, "What's the use?" Keen and flippant critics alike encourage students to regard lightly the value of courses they have taken. To some, education means nothing unless it results in jobs, and no one can say that jobs are not important after living through the hectic years since 1929. By others, education is heavily discounted because knowledge acquired is so rapidly lost by most of those who have been granted high school or college diplomas, or both. Certainly no one will argue that the high mortality rate on facts and ideas supposedly lodged in the minds of students is not appalling. There is much more, of course, that comes to the public from critics of education as now administered and acquired, the burden of

which is that it is through the multitude of extra-curricular activities that students, turned out as graduates, are mainly equipped for life, while most of such equipment is bad or at best worthless.

On the whole, teachers do not receive much encouragement from the evaluation of their work, and those who ponder all the questions that are raised about the effectiveness of their efforts often fell like accepting as a verdict—"Weighed in the balance and found wanting." I only wish to add that I do not think it is so bad as all that. If, in the midst of all the complications and distractions that hamper the task of teaching, including most of the devices offered to help and which are too frantically seized and applied, teachers can hold faithfully to certain simple, fundamental and well-established principles, there is still some hope. The teacher who believes that it is important to show his students the true value of acquiring knowledge and acquiring it accurately, before expressing convictions or deciding on courses of action, cannot fail. This will make for straight thinking—something that the world has always needed, and which is now needed as never before, it seems. Then, too, there is a saving thought in this, that no high school or college course should be considered as more than a beginning. It gives the students something on which to build and points of departure from which to go forward. The teacher who encourages straight thinking and starts his students on periods of growth that will last through life is a success.