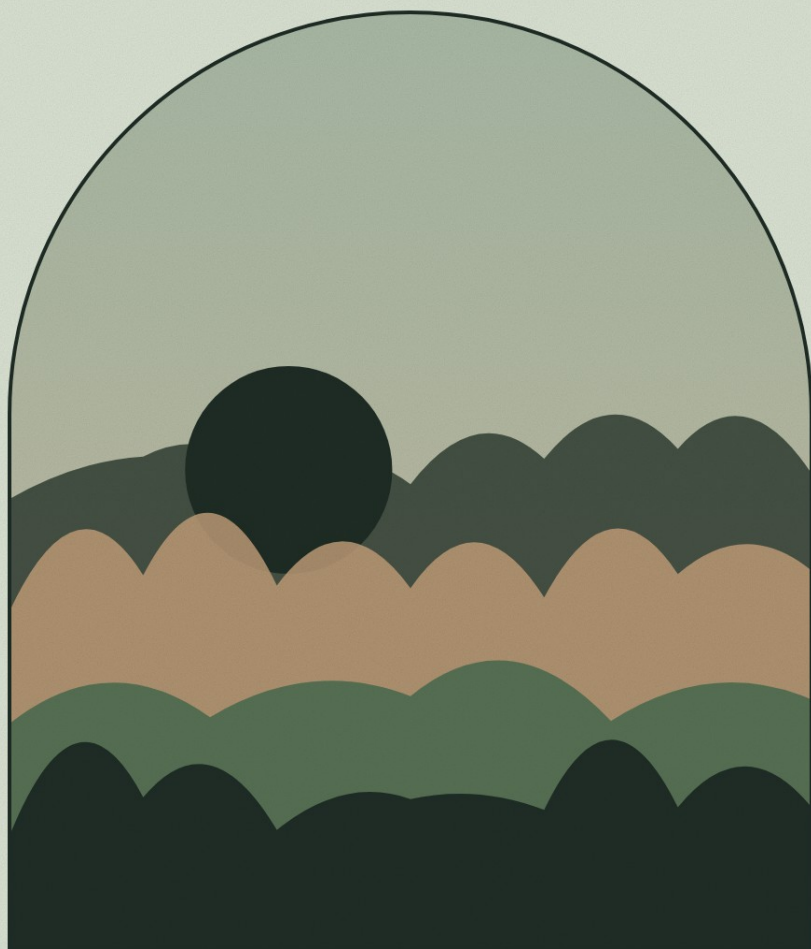




How to Study and Teaching How to Study

FRANK M. MCMURRY

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HOW TO STUDY AND TEACHING HOW TO STUDY

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**TO MY FRIEND ORVILLE T. BRIGHT
THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED, AS A
TOKEN OF WARM AFFECTION AND
PROFESSIONAL INDEBTEDNESS**

PREFACE

Some seven or eight years ago the question, of how to teach children to study happened to be included in a list of topics that I hastily prepared for discussion with one of my classes. On my later examination of this problem I was much surprised, both at its difficulty and scope, and also at the extent to which it had been neglected by teachers. Ever since that time the two questions, How adults should study, and How children should be taught to study, have together been my chief hobby.

The following ideas are partly the result of reading; but since there is a meagre quantity of literature bearing on this general theme, they are largely the result of observation, experiment, and discussion with my students. Many of the latter will recognize their own contributions in these pages, for I have endeavored to preserve and use every good suggestion that came from them; and I am glad to acknowledge here my indebtedness to them.

In addition I must express my thanks for valuable criticisms to my colleague, Dr. George D. Strayer, and also to Dr. Lida B. Earhart, whose suggestive monograph on the same general subject has just preceded this publication.

THE AUTHOR.

Teachers College, May 6, 1909.

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PART I

PRESENT METHODS OF STUDY; NATURE OF STUDY, AND ITS PRINCIPAL FACTORS

CHAPTER I

INDICATIONS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT LEARN TO STUDY PROPERLY; THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE EVIL

No doubt every one can recall peculiar methods of study that he or some one else has at some time followed. During my attendance at high school I often studied aloud at home, along with several other temporary or permanent members of the family. I remember becoming exasperated at times by one of my girl companions. She not only read her history aloud, but as she read she stopped to repeat each sentence five times with great vigor. Although the din interfered with my own work, I could not help but admire her endurance; for the physical labor of mastering a lesson was certainly equal to that of a good farm hand, for the same period of time.

This way of studying history seemed extremely ridiculous. But the method pursued by myself and several others in beginning algebra at about the same time was not greatly superior. Our text-book contained several long sets of problems which were the terror of the class, and scarcely one of which we were able to solve alone. We had several friends, however, who could solve them, and, by calling upon them for help, we obtained the "statement" for each one. All these statements I memorized, and in that way I was able to "pass off" the subject.

A few years later, when a school principal, I had a fifteen-year-old boy in my school who was intolerably lazy. His ambition was

temporarily aroused, however, when he bought a new book and began the study of history. He happened to be the first one called upon, in the first recitation, and he started off finely. But soon he stopped, in the middle of a sentence, and sat down. When I asked him what was the matter, he simply replied that that was as far as he had got. Then, on glancing at the book, I saw that he had been reproducing the text *verbatim*, and the last word that he had uttered was the last word on the first page.

These few examples suggest the extremes to which young people may go in their methods of study. The first instance might illustrate the muscular method of learning history; the second, the memoriter method of reasoning in mathematics. I have never been able to imagine how the boy, in the third case, went about his task; hence, I can suggest no name for his method.

While these methods of study are ridiculous, I am not at all sure that they are in a high degree exceptional.

Collective examples of study

The most extensive investigation of this subject has been made by Dr. Lida B. Earhart,[Footnote: *Systematic Study in the Elementary Schools*. A popular form of this thesis, entitled *Teaching Children to Study*, is published in the Riverside Educational Monographs.] and the facts that she has collected reveal a woeful ignorance of the whole subject of study.

Among other tests, she assigned to eleven- and twelve-year-old children a short selection from a text-book in geography, with the following directions: "Here is a lesson from a book such as you use in class. Do whatever you think you ought to do in studying this lesson thoroughly, and then tell (write down) the different things you have done in studying it. Do not write anything else." [Footnote: *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.]

Out of 842 children who took this test, only fourteen really found, or stated that they had found, the subject of the lesson. Two others said that they *would* find it. Eighty-eight really found, or stated that they had found, the most important parts of the lesson; twenty-one others, that they *would* find them. Four verified the statements in the text, and three others said that they *would* do that. Nine children did nothing; 158 "did not understand the requirements"; 100 gave irrelevant answers; 119 merely "thought," or "tried to understand the lesson," or "studied the lesson"; and 324 simply wrote the facts of the lesson. In other words, 710 out of the 842 sixth- and seventh- grade pupils who took the test gave indefinite and unsatisfactory answers. This number showed that they had no clear knowledge of the principal things to be done in mastering an ordinary text-book lesson in geography. Yet the schools to which they belonged were, beyond doubt, much above the average in the quality of their instruction.

In a later and different test, in which the children were asked to find the subject of a certain lesson that was given to them, 301 out of 828 stated the subject fairly well. The remaining 527 gave only partial, or indefinite, or irrelevant answers. Only 317 out of the 828 were able to discover the most important fact in the lesson. Yet determining the subject and the leading facts are among the main things that any one must do in mastering a topic. How they could have been intelligent in their study in the past, therefore, is difficult to comprehend.

Teachers' and parents complaints about methods of study.

It is, perhaps, unnecessary to collect proofs that young people do not learn how to study, because teachers admit the fact very generally. Indeed, it is one of the common subjects of complaint among teachers in the elementary school, in the high school, and in the college. All along the line teachers condole with one another over this evil, college professors placing the blame on the

instructors in the high school, and the latter passing it down to teachers in the elementary school. Parents who supervise their children's studies, or who otherwise know about their habits of work, observe the same fact with sorrow. It is at least refreshing to find one matter, in the much-disputed field of education, on which teachers and parents are well agreed.

How about the methods of study among teachers themselves? Unless they have learned to study properly, young people cannot, of course, be expected to acquire proper habits from them. *Method of study among teachers.* The most enlightening single experience I have ever had on this question came several years ago in connection with a series of lectures on Primary Education. A course of such lectures had been arranged for me without my full knowledge, and I was unexpectedly called upon to begin it before a class of some seventy-five teachers. It was necessary to commence speaking without having definitely determined my first point. I had, however, a few notes which I was attempting to decipher and arrange, while talking as best I could, when I became conscious of a slight clatter from all parts of the room. On looking up I found that the noise came from the pencils of my audience, and they were writing down my first pointless remarks. Evidently discrimination in values was not in their program. They call to mind a certain theological student who had been very unsuccessful in taking notes from lectures. In order to prepare himself, he spent one entire summer studying stenography. Even after that, however, he was unsuccessful, because he could not write quite fast enough to take down *all* that was said.

Even more mature students often reveal very meager knowledge of methods of study. I once had a class of some thirty persons, most of whom were men twenty-five to thirty-five years of age, who were college graduates and experienced teachers. One day I asked them, "When has a book been read properly?" The first reply came from a