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Title: "Hints on Education," by Charles Nisbet

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HINTS ON EDUCATION

By Charles Nisbet

September 1812

The Port Folio, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 258-261.

FOR THE PORT FOLIO.

HINTS ON EDUCATION, BY DR. CHARLES NISBET.

Written soon after his arrival in America, and about the time of his entering on the duties of principal of Dickinson College.

THE business of a schoolmaster is to teach the principles of grammar, that of a humanist is to point out the beauties of the classics, to teach history, antiquities and criticism, so far as they relate to the authors he explains to his pupils.

The schoolmaster must receive his scholars when they offer, and divide them into classes according to their capacities and time of study, which increases his labour in proportion to the number of these classes.

The fewer classes that a school consists of, the greater will be the progress of the scholars, and the labour of the master proportionably less.

If all the scholars enter at the same time, and proceed together, as is the custom of some great schools, the attention of the master would be less divided, and the scholars would receive greater benefit from his instructions.

A schoolmaster instructs by extempore and repeated admonitions; a humanist by premeditated and continued discourse, which his pupils are supposed to be desirous to retain, and commit to their memory.

If an able schoolmaster is appointed professor of the Greek and Latin languages, he can spare only as much time for his higher classes, as the others leave vacant, and it seems impossible in the noise of a school, to call the attention of youth to the beauty of a metaphor, or the propriety of an expression in the classics.

Nothing can be more false than to imagine that the progress of boys in their studies depends on the length of time that they attend the school; most of the time being ordinarily spent in dissipation, and impatient longings for the time of dismissal, in spite of the labours of the most skillful masters.

When boys are kept long in the school, they leave it with an exulting joy, and a resolution to give themselves no more trouble about their lessons, till they are obliged to enter it again, and the longer their confinement has been, this joy will be the greater.

Boys in school are with difficulty kept to their lessons under the eye of their master; but when his attention is necessarily confined to one class, the others feel themselves at liberty to do what they please.

While boys need the eye of their master to keep them to their studies, it is impossible that they should make any progress in the studies of humanity: far less can they profit by lectures in philosophy.

The university of Paris at its first foundation, contained only two professors, one of Latin and the other of Greek. But at that period, young men did not apply to these studies, till they were of full age, and capable of being taught by lectures.

The university of Edinburgh, as I have been informed by a learned professor of that seminary, had, at its beginning, only a principal and a professor of divinity, who drew their students from other seminaries, after they had passed their courses of philosophy. Other masters were added, in process of time, whose

learning and diligence gave celebrity to the university, though their salaries are very small to this day.

But as this college is not intended as a rival to any of the other seminaries in America, and as the attendance of students, and the rewards of teaching cannot be great in a new country, it will be necessary for the trustees to use all proper means to increase their funds, and to choose proper masters for carrying on the studies of such as are already entered, or may in future enter this college.

Without pronouncing any censure on other seminaries, it may be affirmed, that the business of education is better managed by distinct teachers of particular branches of science, than by tutors, whose labour is bestowed in common, and whose diligence cannot therefore be traced in the progress of their pupils.

The private application of the students and the pertinent advices of their masters in their lectures, must be of far greater use to them, than a multiplicity of lectures, and tedious attendance, which often produce weariness, and an aversion to study.

One hour's teaching at a time, on any branch of science, will contribute more to the instruction of youth, and exciting them to diligence, than three or four hours of dismal attendance on a tutor, who must be as wearied, and as much at a loss what to say as his pupils. The practice and success of the most celebrated universities in Europe, afford a sufficient illustration of this position.

The practice of the English universities who teach by tutors is not to be pleaded against that of other seminaries; because in England there are many encouragements to study, which are not to be found elsewhere. Students on exhibitions and charitable foundations, can afford to remain long at the universities, where, by the help of their large and noble libraries, they attain the learning and skill of celebrated professors, and may expect ample livings in an opulent church, in the gift of their pupils. But it must be obvious to every one, that no such advantages and rewards of study exist in America, and therefore no such well-qualified tutors can be expected.

As the study of geography, chronology, and history, are much in request in the present age, and may be attended by students, even before they enter on a

course of philosophy, it will be highly proper to elect an able teacher of these, even before the philosophy classes are formed.

The time of attendance, after leaving the grammar school, may be four years: the first for the critical study of the Latin and Greek, geography, and the first six books of Euclid: the second for algebra and the higher parts of the mathematics: the third for logic, criticism, ancient and modern history: the fourth for natural and moral philosophy, with the elements of natural jurisprudence.

Every professor, by being elected to teach a distinct branch of science, will have occasion from year to year, to attain great experience in teaching, and to improve and enlarge his lectures. Whereas if the same person is appointed to teach different sciences, his lectures must be confused and imperfect to the last degree.

No corporal punishment should be inflicted on students after leaving the grammar school. But their errors should be corrected by small fines, or private and public admonitions.