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### *The Most Efficient Way Is the Most Skillful*

The most efficient way is also the most skillful. It requires, above all, the right native energy patterns; then a careful analysis of the activity concerned; and finally, enormous practice.

Suppose you wish to become a skilled proofreader. You analyze the job. You find that your eyes and mind must easily cover 7,000 words of text hourly, day in and day out, catching all errors. Hence you study the job of rapid, accurate reading. It requires good eyesight, smooth eye movement, the ability to grasp phrases and even sentences in a single quick glance, familiarity with proofreaders' signs, and absolute concentration of attention.

Next, you practise learning to read swiftly and accurately. You do this spontaneously and unanalytically as you read your paper or scan a magazine. You also practise many exercises in developing good reading habits. You find your best position in reading and stick to it. You practise developing a large vocabulary and drill yourself in spelling. You improve your eye grasp by learning to take in as rapidly as possible

many words in a single glance. You cultivate the art of skimming, training yourself to get the gist of what you read by running your eye in a sort of zig-zag fashion down each column of reading matter.

Finally, you fit the job of proofreading to your native energy pattern. You find, after practice, that you do your best work in alternate periods of, say, half an hour of reading and five minutes of rest. You also read more efficiently if you eat a morning and mid-afternoon light lunch. Furthermore, your mental energies operate better in the afternoon than in the morning. So you adapt your work accordingly.

Thus with every activity, occupation and career. You develop skill only after you know such minutiae about the work and worker, and after constant practice.

Many activities seem to be wholly distinct and to require no single common skill. Often, however, skill in one type of work overlaps with that required in another utterly different activity. A former doctor recently told me how he applied the principles of medical diagnosis to reorganizing a receivership and bankruptcy office. He studied every job, made a list of every unfavorable symptom in organization or method, arrived at principles of reorganization, and finally prescribed the necessary changes in equipment and procedure. His skill in medical diagnosis contributed greatly to his success in the receivership job. Hence he economized on

time and energy, and was highly praised for his achievement.

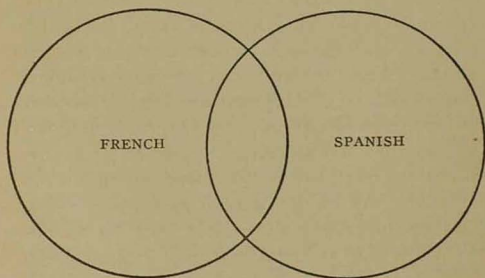
#### THE VALUE OF VERSATILITY

Cultivate intelligent versatility, and in the long run you economize on energy. This is puzzling, isn't it? Well, here's the explanation.

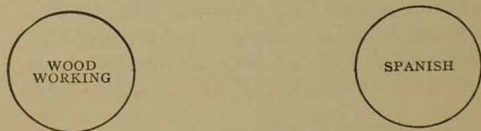
The versatile man develops habits in many fields. He reads Latin, handles wood working machinery, sails a boat, plays poker, has sold automobiles and phonographs, knows geography through and through, writes passable sonnets when in the mood, and runs a small greenhouse. Each skill deals with matters considerably removed from all others in the list. Now, it is well known that habits can be transferred to new situations in so far as the latter resemble those in which the habits were first formed. Thus, mastery of French aids one in learning Spanish only in so far as Spanish words, grammar, and style resemble French. In this case the aid would prove substantial; but of course the reverse would be true of skill in navigating, for in this there is no single factor that can be found in the use of Spanish. Each skill lies at the center of a field of possible activities. The closer the latter are to the center, the greater the ease of transferring that central skill to them. We might well call such a field a sphere of influence. At its outer edges the activities contain *only one factor*

*each* in common with the focal skill. This represents the minimum of transfer.

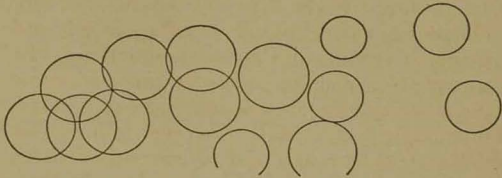
We now see life as a whole somewhat in the design of a galaxy crowded with activities each of which spreads out according to some law like that of the inverse square. We see thousands of these fields overlapping, some slightly, some greatly. The field of French crowds in pretty closely upon the field of Spanish, thus:



But the field of wood working lies far from the outermost fringes of Spanish, thus:



A telescope which could look through the reaches of time as well as space would then reveal the stream of living as a flux of moving fields which, when reduced to a diagram, would look like this:



Now, in the course of a normal lifetime, a man must deal with thousands of situations. He must meet hundreds of people, make innumerable judgments affecting his fortunes, and wake up every morning prepared to encounter surprises. What shall we say then about his chances of long-range success and happiness? Is it not clear that a shot gun with extra wide scatter would serve much better than a rifle? This figure of speech understates the fact; for a habit is not merely a single buckshot flying through space, it is more like a moving electric charge surrounded by its own field of force. It does not have to collide head on with another habit in order to prove effective; its field need only overlap upon that of another habit in passing, very much like a star sweeping past another star millions of miles away.

Very well! The versatile man builds up, let us say, twenty basic habits, each of which has a large field of force. That is, each embraces partial activities which occur in many other forms of behavior. The twenty fields spread over much more of life than any single field can. Hence they enable the man to adjust quickly and easily to many more common situations. His spread of learning is enormously increased, while the quantity of effort for new learning is correspondingly decreased. In other words, he is able to handle at least part of many new situations, as a result of his earlier acquisition of twenty basic habits.

But we still have to consider the most important advantage, which is hard to phrase, though easy to understand. I think we shall call it habit hybridization—a horrendous mouthful but pat. Here is a simple case from life. A man I know learned Spanish as a boy in high school and was so interested in it that he pushed on by himself. To earn a living, he took a course in a business college, where he mastered stenography, typewriting and bookkeeping. When he went forth to find a job, the only good opportunity in sight was with a telephone company in Mexico. Obviously his command of Spanish was an immense aid in getting the post and in keeping it.

Now, it would be foolish to suggest that stenography as an activity overlaps upon Span-

ish. Here we see a different set-up. The opportunity itself was complex. It contained many activities, among them speaking Spanish, writing Spanish, stenography, and typewriting. These unrelated habits had to combine in order to dominate the situation. Thus ever throughout life. The ordinary job is fairly simple; hence almost anybody can qualify for it; hence the supply of applicants usually exceeds the number of jobs; hence wages are forced to a minimum. But the exceptional opportunity is a web of activities, all of which must be mastered. Hence only a man whose previous habits come close to the total web has a chance.

At this point somebody may raise an objection. It may be said that no energy is conserved merely by having a set of skills that enable one to get exceptional jobs. At most the versatile man of this sort is able to get somewhat higher wages than the chap who must stick to the simple tasks with the ability of almost everybody. To this I would reply that, as a rule, life flings just such odd combinations of duties at us almost every week. They bob up in jobs, in human relations, and in one's personal pursuits of pleasure. Many of them must be faced willy nilly. For the common man they are crises. They exhaust him and often break him. When they crop up in the job, they serve mainly to favor the versatile man in the eyes of the paymaster. Earning more money and winning promotion more

rapidly, the versatile man struggles less for bread and butter; he enjoys shorter hours and usually easiest toil, for he plans each act swiftly and surely out of his rich background of diverse habits. So he is less often exposed to defeat, bewilderment, and anger; hence he preserves a healthful poise. He is at one with his larger environment.

The supreme tragedy of American education springs from the lamentable failure of our school teachers to drill pupils in genuine, well-planned versatility. Perhaps no more lavish waste of human energy can be found in the chronicles of mankind than that of the past forty years of consistent, enthusiastic, expensive and thoroughly grandiose mistraining of a hundred million young people. At a cost of more than sixty billion dollars in that period, we have succeeded in raising a generation of incompetent, confused, disillusioned and rebellious adults. The two worst possible mistakes were made. In the first place, none of the basic habits has been thoroughly established so that easy, successful functioning follows; and, in the second place, the habits selected for the supposed versatile spread have been, in the main, petty, pretty, and with few important linkages. Let me be painfully specific.

In the grammar grades few children master the art of reading. Everybody admits that this is the fundamental of all education, for nine-



tenths of all men learn comes to them, in part if not in whole, through reading. It has been estimated that fully half of ordinary knowledge is acquired entirely through the printed page. Hence a child ill trained in this skill goes into the world a mental cripple.

Geography is taught in a most superficial manner, as a rule. History is not taught at all, in the genuine sense; only a few names, dates, and supposedly red-letter events are hammered into the unwilling youth; nothing of the significance of these ever penetrates—if the teacher can prevent it.

Move upward into high school. Here you find the commonest policy to be that of offering the young a taste of this and a taste of that, with the idea that he is merely to broaden his horizons and ascertain, by much sampling, what he likes and dislikes. (There are exceptions to this trend, but they are few.) In order to sample everything in sight, the youth must be offered a very tiny draught from the largest possible number of founts. His days are a clutter of five, six, seven, and even eight courses. He flits from French at nine to European History at ten; then on to Algebra at eleven, to Civics at one, and after all that a couple of hours either in the manual training shop or in the gymnasium.

If any one of these subjects were drilled into the learner so that he became skillful, I should raise no protest. But it is notorious—and

a stale comment—that his French teacher seldom knows French, and his Civics teacher cannot describe accurately how his home town is actually managed. Even his athletic try-outs serve his body ill. He is not drilled in the ways of health and high energy nearly so well as he might be, though I am free to praise many teachers of hygiene and a few athletic instructors for their efforts in this direction. They serve their classes far better than most other teachers.

Most youths come out of high school totally unprepared for a life of pleasure, profit, fame, or fortune. They have dabbled about and become past masters of dabbling—a useful habit in its place but hardly one to use in making a living or developing a wholesome attitude toward society. To make matters worse, the graduates have dabbled at too many things remote from American life and piffling. Of what earthly use is French? I can find not the slightest service in the language for any American of 1933 and after. Nobody uses it. Fewer still will be using it ten years hence. It has a literature which is merely pleasant—and can be enjoyed almost as well in translation. Of what use is Civics, as usually taught? I see no value in it; on the contrary much potential harm, for it is still taught as the “forms of government” and not as a thoroughly realistic account of how politicians and business men manipulate elections, fool voters, pass

laws to authorize lawlessness and to beat competitors.

Well, so one might run on and on with the indictment. But it has been drawn and thundered so often that I desist.

What can you do about it?

Elsewhere I have discussed this in detail.\* No matter what your energy, your interests, your job, or your environment, you are always faced with three types of problems.

First, you must adjust to your environment. Here you get food and shelter, air and sunlight, good climate or bad, health or disease, a good job, a dull job, or no job at all. Whether you adapt well or ill, whether you get much or little satisfaction from your environment depends on how well you know the peculiarities of your world. You learn these when you master geography, the first of the three hardy perennials of modern knowledge.

Secondly, you must understand as well as you can all living forms and their ways of behavior. You must get along passably with yourself, your family, friends, neighbors, business associates, and acquaintances. The more thoroughly you study biology and the related field of psychology, the better your skill in dealing successfully with people and other animals, and in managing yourself.

Third, you must be able to interpret your

\* "The Art of Learning," especially pages 34-45.

observations and experiences. You must draw inferences, study cause and effect, discover general principles and compute. You develop skill here through learning mathematics.

Of course, as these subjects are taught in schools today, they do not offer the universal overlap I describe. But this is because they are badly taught. The fault lies not with the subject, but in teachers. Geography should be taught as a true insight into all of the influences at work on the surface of the earth. Every well-educated person should understand the manner in which climate, winds, rainfall, elevation, soil conditions and the like determine the relentless course of events. Every war roots in some wretched adjustment between men and their environments. Men struggle with, conquer, or are defeated by these, first of all. If they cannot get food, shelter, and clothing to keep them alive by peaceful means, they take what they need by force. Study the geography of Japan and you will see many of the causes of her belligerence.

Psychology, too, should be taught in terms of individuals, and how people of all kinds behave in different kinds of environments. People should learn through mathematics the practical problems that grow out of man and his behavior toward his environment, and its abstract forms through which we compute, predict, infer, deduce, and arrive at abstract principles which we apply to concrete questions.

Through these three subjects, we learn the five major arts of management: the art of managing yourself, objects, animals, people, and ideas.