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Pioneers in Reading II: Arthur Irving Gates

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Pioneers in Reading II: Arthur Irving Gates

Arthur I. Gates has always been interested in the facts of human behavior. When he was a graduate student at the University of California in 1914-15 his desire to get at the truth caused an adventure in exposure of fake psychology. A famous magic and "mind-reading" act of the time was playing at a nearby theater. First Arthur Gates and two other students visited the performance and took complete notes. Diagnosis and careful planning ensued. Shortly after, he and the other members of Lambda chapter of Phi Delta Kappa again visited the performance. The students of the educational fraternity distributed themselves throughout the audience and took turns jumping up to expose each trick as it was performed. The magician grew more upset. In final desperation he shouted "smart alecks" at his tormentors—but the truth about the "magic" was demonstrated.

The desire to get at the facts has characterized most of Arthur Gates' professional work, a career marked by wide ranging interests and tremendous productivity in general psychology and educational psychology as well as in study of reading problems. This history had its beginnings in the public schools of California, continued with undergraduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, an M. A. degree from the same institution in 1915, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1917. From that date Professor Gates has been actively associated with Teachers College, Columbia, in the different academic ranks and in various admin-

istrative posts culminating in the directorship of the Division of Foundations of Education in the College. At present he is Supervisor of Research of the Teachers College Institute of Language Arts. Outside the college he has been active in many professional organizations and has been president or chairman of such groups as the American Educational Research Association, Section Q of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the division of educational psychology of the American Psychological Association.

During the forty years of his professional career Gates' output of research and writing has been enormous, with about two hundred titles to his credit in books, articles, yearbook chapters, and other publications. These include many contributions in general psychology such as early monographs on memory, on variations in efficiency and on different phases of learning. In educational psychology his books include *Psychology for Students of*



Arthur Irving Gates

Education (First published in 1923), *Elementary Psychology* (1925) and *Educational Psychology* (with Jersild, McConnell, Challman) (1942) books in which many of the teachers of America first became acquainted with educational psychology.

In the field of reading instruction Gates' original researches and wide-ranging writings have made him one of the most influential

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figures in the United States and throughout the world. In 1922 his book on the *Psychology of Disability in Reading and Spelling* foreshadowed a long series of research studies by himself and various students in diagnostic and remedial work and his later *Improvement of Reading* first published in 1927 is a standard reference in this field. Other early books were *New Methods in Primary Reading*, 1928, and *Interest and Ability in Reading*, 1930. *New Methods in Primary Reading* raised many questions about certain excesses in the phonetic approach to the teaching of reading and substituted what Gates first called an "intrinsic" method with emphasis upon visual techniques and getting the meaning of material read. His method, with some later variations, has become standard practice in most American schools. The second book reported a score of experimental studies dealing with reading interests and materials followed by illustrations of procedures in the primary grades. This book included pioneer studies in vocabulary control which also influenced most subsequent practice in the preparation and use of reading materials. It is no exaggeration to say that these books largely changed reading from an isolated and mechanical exercise to a series of consecutive, meaningful, and zestful activities for American children. Their influence has been bolstered by scores of Gates' research articles in professional journals, by practical application of this research in a series of basic readers published by Macmillan Company, and by a group of well-known reading tests published by the Bureau of Publications, Teachers College.

In looking at the Gates publications one is impressed by the range and by the cruciality of the research studies and more general papers. The titles vary from "The Abilities of an Expert Marksman Tested in a Psychological Laboratory" to "The Work Book in Practice." A few samples of decisive investigations in addition to the books mentioned above are "A Modern Systematic *vs* an

Opportunistic Method of Teaching," which lays a psychological base for planning in teaching, *Methods of Determining Reading Readiness*, the most complete analysis of measures of reading readiness in print, "An Experimental Comparison of the Study-test and Test-study Methods in Spelling" which provides a basis for a whole pattern of spelling instruction, and "Role of Personality Maladjustment in Reading Disability" a pioneer study of the subtle interconnections of reading and emotions. Breadth of research interests is further illustrated in such publications as a 1925 article on "Methods and Theories of Teaching the Deaf to Read" and a 1942 article on "Teaching Reading to Slow Learning or 'Dull-Normal' Pupils." And these are only a sample!

The effects of Gates' work are difficult to estimate because they are still in process. The widespread and decisive influence of his studies in reading in the 1920's and 1930's has been mentioned. He himself was influenced by Cattell, by Thorndike and by Woodworth in his psychological ideas and these concepts in turn may prove to be the facts and principles in educational psychology which most affect school practice. His researches, not only in reading but in spelling, handwriting, vocabulary and with handicapped children have many implications for teaching methods, some of which are still being worked out by teachers and school psychologists.

Reports of publications are a cold view of a humane and diversified scholar. The life of Arthur I. Gates is characterized by warm family relationships, a wide circle of friendships, happy relations with colleagues, and generosity to students in personal interest and in continuing efforts in their behalf. His influence on reading instruction has been due not only to his research, his critical appraisals of practice, and his other writing, but to his impact as a person on thousands of colleagues and students who transmit his ideas in most parts of the world.