METHODS OF INQUIRY

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With new school programs a topic of everyday conversation, the public is ready to accept a sound, new curriculum in English. Here, such a term as ‘‘new school programs’’ means, roughly, school learning that conforms to tenets of scholarship, especially to those tenets concerning structure of disciplines and methods of inquiry. For example, in some older programs, literature was used in units on such topics as Eskimos and immigrants. Often the use of literature in these topical units was mainly to provide information about Eskimos and immigrants and to improve skills of reading. However valuable, such activity is hardly literary. On the other hand, a work of literature in newer programs is used to teach pupils how to read literature as literature and how to use methods of inquiry appropriate to literary study.

Some barriers to newer programs derive not from public reaction but, oddly, from those professionally concerned with the teaching of English. Usually the opposition is not mere hostility to the new, but comes from failure to understand and to be convinced that the newer ends and means are desirable and feasible. A typical reaction to programs based on the newer ideas holds these to be impractical, unreal, unnecessary, or too radical. Practicality and reality are thus associated with the familiar, with the solving of everyday problems. But there is no necessary relation between the unfamiliar on the one hand and the practical, the desirable, and the necessary on the other. This paper, therefore, first suggests the desirability of these newer kinds of programs and then identifies and examines some barriers and problems that hinder their fulfillment.

The term ‘‘methods of inquiry’’ refers to procedures—with or without pedagogical adaptation—that specialists in a field of knowledge use professionally. Each subject field—history, zoology, linguistics, rhetoric, and so on—has evolved unique methods for investigating distinctive kinds of problems and objects. The use of such investigative methods is one characteristic of activity in a discipline.

Whether in advanced study or in school learning, investigative method characteristically is not taught as an isolated aspect of content. Usually the student of a discipline learns to use and to understand the methods through such activities as these: (1) learning the presuppositions of the field, (2) seeking answers to questions relevant to a given area of inquiry, (3) understanding relevant concepts and using terminology that names the concepts, (4) solving problems according to accepted procedure, and (5) working within the limits and facing up to the difficulties imposed by the field. In this paper such terms as ‘‘appropriate inquiry’’ and ‘‘relevant inquiry’’ are synonymous with ‘‘methods of inquiry,’’ just defined.

There are at least three reasons for concern with methods of inquiry in school learning. The study of investigative method increases interest in a subject, enables the learner to acquire the best available ways of thinking about it, and provides a basis for his continuing education after his school-going days.

The term ‘‘structure of disciplines’’ refers to sets of those concepts or gen-

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eralizations that, once understood, explain many specific facts. For example, the concept of the phoneme in some methods of linguistic study may be used to explain several facts concerning language. An understanding of that concept helps one know why his native language sounds familiar to him while the speech of a language unknown to him sounds like a meaningless jumble. Also, such understanding helps him know why a speaker of one language tends not to hear sounds that are important in another. Similarly, an adequately formulated concept of plot is useful in his thinking about many works of literature.

Perhaps the main reason for structure of disciplines in school learning is that the accumulation of knowledge is so vast that coverage (if it ever was feasible) is now impossible. Therefore, an understanding of the concepts basic to the discipline gives the learner a way of explaining, organizing, and thinking about much specific fact and detail.

In the field of English, a distinguishing feature of the newer curriculum is that ideally it encourages the pupil to make firsthand and appropriate inquiry into important kinds of knowledge—into language, into works of literature, and into the processes of composition. For a teacher to guide such learning, he needs training in the relevant disciplines. Specifically, it is necessary that his training in language be guided by those who are themselves specifically trained in methods of literary criticism; and in composition, by those knowledgeable in rhetoric and in the practical problems of constructing oral and written discourse.

Such training is intended to give the teacher control of investigative methods in three areas of English. In addition, he requires control of an investigative method in planning and teaching, a fourth aspect of the teaching of English. That method gives him procedures for thinking rationally and systematically about the crucial aspects of instruction. Helping the teacher inquire into these four aspects of the teaching of English may well be a new objective in the education of teachers.

An examination of these areas of inquiry reveals some problems and barriers that face those who would develop this newer program. Because language study is the least familiar and the least understood aspect of English teaching, it receives emphasis in this discussion.

Literature

The teaching of literature as appropriate inquiry into literary works is based partly on an explicit and defensible idea of what literature is. For the nature of literature is an important basis from which to derive objectives proper for literary study and to derive learning activities for reaching those objectives. The field of literary criticism is the source of information on the nature of literature and on methods proper to literary study.

A view of literature based on the best available literary criticism provides the teacher with one important basis for making selections for his group, asking the right questions, constructing valid examinations, and carrying on in relevant and coherent fashion all other classroom work in literature. Thus, a teacher’s understanding of a system of criticism can help to make the study of “Stopping by Woods . . .” in the third period English class less a session in free association
and more a session in systematic, sensitive, and relevant inquiry into the poem.

The suggestion that the teaching of literature be informed by an appropriate discipline often meets with negative response—with the contention that disciplined study "spoils" literature for pupils and "takes the joy out of it." While there has obviously been much misuse of critical method in teaching, a failure in pedagogy does not imply that disciplined literary study is therefore unfeasible. Nor is there antithesis between sensitivity of response and properly rigorous inquiry. Such inquiry offers its own pleasure.

Discovering ways to adapt systems of criticism and other investigative methods to the capacities of pupils is a much needed kind of research that is suited to the field of English education. The failure of schools to treat literature as a systematic and genuinely literary study is a failure both in scholarship and in pedagogy. For there has been failure to identify the appropriate scholarship in criticism and to adapt that scholarship to the experiences of pupils.

**Composition and Language Study**

In the American English-teaching culture, composition and language study are often confused, thought of as the same thing, or thought of as two aspects of the same thing. Discussing composition and language study together makes it convenient to suggest that the two are different. As mentioned, most of this discussion concerns language study, the least familiar component of the curriculum.

A difference between language study and composition is that composition needs no justification in the curriculum but language study does. One condition that hinders acceptance of the idea that schools should teach what language and English are is the American English-teaching culture, which characteristically holds narrowly practical views about what the English curriculum should be. From my discussions with teachers and others actively concerned with English teaching, I have inferred that English is commonly viewed as a mere skill building program; that any study of grammar and language unlikely to improve practical communication skills is a waste of the school's resources; that learners in English classes should be innocent about the nature of language and the structure of English, but those same learners in the science class should be informed about the nature of clouds and the structure of plants.

Our everyday experience also hinders development of programs in which language phenomena are the objects of inquiry. For example, Bloomfield noted that people can talk about writing because they have learned to write under explicit verbal instruction, but they have not learned to talk about speech or language because they learned to talk without specific verbal teaching.1 Because people have not learned to think and talk about language, and because of conventional views of the aims of English, the typical citizen as well as the typical educator understandably finds the notion of linguistic knowledge as school learning strange and unfamiliar. A typical discussion of the aims of language study almost always drifts off into a discussion of usage or of composition. Not

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only does that reaction indicate the unfamiliarity of linguistic content; it indicates the narrowly practical emphasis of English teaching in our culture.

Although no other single aspect of the environment is more intimate and pervasive than language, ignorance and misconception about it prevail. If the purpose of the school is to help people understand what the world is like, then this prevailing ignorance implies an educational need. As indicated, filling such a need requires first, an emphasis on disciplines and inquiry in the education of teachers, and second, an overcoming of narrow views of English teaching.

A third problem concerns the dearth of instructional materials. Right materials for language study must be informed by the state of man’s linguistic knowledge. Of course, in this respect language study is no different from the other components of English, for these, too, need materials that embody the best scholarly content.

One attack that may be made on the problem could be adaptations of papers that have been written by linguists. The adaptation, of course, must be in terms comprehensible to learners. Although adaptations of literary works may be undesirable, there seems no reason to fear sound simplification of linguistic papers as a basis for a scientific kind of inquiry. So far as I know, this idea hasn’t been extensively tried, but a suggestion for this kind of material in the teaching of science is under serious consideration.2

The term “integration” suggests a fourth problem. The preceding discussion suggests that language study has its own objects and methods of inquiry. Briefly, the nature of language and the structure of English are examples of the objects of linguistic inquiry. The methods, of course, are those of the descriptive linguist.

Composition, on the other hand, has its distinctive objects and methods of inquiry. Its objects are spoken and written discourse, and its methods derive from those of the rhetorician and the practicing writer.

Similarly, the objects of literary study are works of poetry, drama, and fiction, and the literary critic is the primary acceptable source of methods for studying those works.

Thus, literature, language study, and composition are different. Each has its own objects of inquiry and its own methods of inquiry. Each is properly concerned with developing in the pupil a range of learning that is appropriate to its subject matter and to its investigative method.

If the aim is to teach structure of disciplines and methods of inquiry, such teaching necessarily implies a separation of the disciplines. For a method of inquiry can be used only for the purposes for which it was evolved. A method of literary criticism can be used only to study those objects and to find answers to those questions that a given system of criticism addresses. A rhetorical method is appropriate only to the problems of constructing and understanding discourses of persuasion. A linguistic method cannot be used to study literature itself, nor can a rhetorical method be used to investigate English structure.

Efforts to escape these necessary and valuable differences by attempting to

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fuse or to integrate these three components of English into a single entity mislead the learner by perpetuating his innocence of the nature of knowledge and of investigative method.

A common assertion relevant to these comments is that the third period English class would go better if topics in composition were drawn from study in language or literature. The popularity of such proposals justifies further comment.

A student’s composition on Huckleberry Finn may be considered an exercise in composition, in literature, or in both. In teaching, it is often necessary to emphasize, and in assigning work it is indispensable for the teacher to know what learning or behavior the pupil is expected to acquire as a result of his doing that work. With literature emphasized, the learner’s doing a paper on Huckleberry Finn may be appropriate. But with composition emphasized, his doing a paper on a literary topic may not be adequately helpful. Our everyday experience indicates that, other things the same, the learner is likely to do well with a composition to the extent that he is interested in his topic. A topic really interesting to him may very well not be one in literature, and it may very well not be one in language. Because of the varied interests that pupils have, the aims of composition will probably not be best served by limiting topics for exposition to the fields of language and literature. Although the composition on Huckleberry Finn may be an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, we may kill the literary bird, but the bird of composition may fly away.

It is one thing to recognize that composition, language, and literature are different, and another to recognize that the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening necessarily are part of English and of other parts of the school’s curriculum. Because the communication skills are used, there is ample opportunity for guiding pupils in their use. I find it useful, therefore, to distinguish between writing and speaking on the one hand and oral and written composition on the other. Writing and speaking occur continuously in the school and pupils may receive appropriate guidance in using those skills. But such guidance may not be the main concern. Oral and written composition is that part of English in which such knowledge and skill receive primary, specific, and systematic instruction. The distinction is a recognition of an obvious but valuable reality of the classroom in English.

Another argument asserts that study of English syntactic patterns makes it likely that pupils will use those patterns in their compositions. That argument, too, is hard to defend.

First, a study of structural or generative grammar typically does not get beyond the baby sentence. Inquiry into a structural grammar necessarily involves phonology (segmental and suprasegmental) and morphology. Usually the study of syntax is limited to quite simple structures. In one method of analysis, important aspects of sentences—modification, transitive, direct object, and others—cannot be dealt with at the level of syntax, but require a higher (but not yet developed) level of analysis that may be called semology or discourse
analysis. Second, the examples in a study of English structure are characteristically not from writing but from speech. There are, of course, real differences between the discourse of speech and the discourse of writing. Third, methods and objects proper to linguistic study are different from the methods and problems of constructing oral and written discourse. An examination of any list of faults in composition will show that these rarely fall into the province of linguistic study, but usually concern usage, relations of author and discourse to audience, conventions of the writing system, clarity of statement, and the like—matters which typically do not concern the linguist as linguist.

Generative grammar is a younger infant than structural, and its typical study is still at the level of the baby sentence—phrase structure sentences and simple transformations. This elemental state of linguistic descriptions of English is not a failure of the linguist, but reflects his going in new directions. For the job of a real linguist is not primarily to serve the needs of schools but to analyze and describe languages and to devise improved methods for doing his work. If the school intends to teach what language and English are, its primary, acceptable source of information is the field of linguistics, and it must make appropriate selections of content from that field and use that content as one basis for selecting objectives. The nature of linguistic content suggests that it cannot be extensively used in the teaching of composition. The study of phonology and morphology, for example, is not the study relevant to the construction of discourse.

Writing and speech are different, and the kind of discourse to be read is the kind of discourse to be written. Therefore, a defensible transition to writing is not from speech or from grammatical study but from reading and study of the kinds of writing the learner is expected to do. More than one teacher has observed that pupils learn unconsciously to write the kind of discourse they read.

Selecting a grammar to teach is a fifth problem. A grammar as a grammar is valuable in proportion to the adequacy and clarity of its description of language. It is commonly held that that grammar is best which is most likely to improve composition. Of course, one must know the purpose one has for teaching anything. But, as mentioned, it is arguable whether awareness of English structure is a key to composition.

If the aim is to develop an understanding of how language works, then obviously a grammar must be selected, and the criterion should be its effectiveness in showing the learner how his language works. A structural grammar may help him see English as a system of formal signs that conveys meaning; and a generative grammar, as a device consisting of a finite set of ordered rules with an unlimited output of grammatical sentences. Each of these grammars reveals English from a different conceptual structure, and each offers a contribution to the education of pupils.

A sixth problem in teaching language is unlearning. Usually teachers are concerned with increasing knowledge, developing skills, and the like. But in teaching linguistic knowledge, there is a problem of helping pupils unlearn

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ideas that are mistaken but are inevitably acquired from everyday living. I refer to the confusion of language and writing, to such folklore as the supposed precision of the French language, the so-called crudeness of Hottentot, and the much believed corruption of English by the advertising industry. Because lay misconception interferes with the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, language study involves an unlearning process. We need to know, therefore, whether unlearning is best conceived as debunking, brainwashing, displacement, a judicious combination of these, or as something else.

A seventh problem concerns learning by discovery. My experience in teaching the structure of English suggests that not everything can be taught well, economically, and honestly through a discovery procedure.

For example, Trager and Smith tell us that English has four levels of stress; Chomsky, Halle, and Lukoff say that English has but two. If the aim is to provide the learner with an understanding of English stress, which of these or of other systems is he to "discover" for himself?

Obviously, pupils cannot be expected to discover and describe English stress for themselves. To make such discoveries requires technical training in phonetics, phonemics, and a trained ear. However, pupils can inquire into a systematic description of English stress.

It is reasonable for the teacher to begin his teaching of English stress by discussing and illustrating what stress is and what it does, then saying to his class something like this: "Different linguists have different descriptions of how the English stress system works. We are going to learn one of these descriptions." From that point, instruction may proceed in deductive fashion, meaningfully, honestly, and economically.

While there may be parts of the school curriculum which lend themselves to pupils’ honestly making discoveries of knowledge worth having, much of the nature of language and much of the structure of English do not. Seasoned, competent linguists often can’t agree whether a given syllable occurred under weak or tertiary stress. And living in our literate culture burdens the learner with almost insurmountable difficulty were he expected to discover for himself that language is by Sapir’s definition purely human, noninstinctive, auditory, and the rest.

A conversation I had once with a specialist in inquiry procedures of teaching ironically gave some support to this assertion. In his explanation of how the nature of language could be taught through discovery procedures, that specialist came out with the usual collection of lay misconceptions about language. Of course, the study of language in school is intended to refute such misconceptions.

Curriculum Inquiry

In the pedagogical part of the teacher’s education, the most important single element is the investigative method of the specialist in curriculum and instruction. That specialist is concerned with four kinds of problems: (1) deriving and formulating educational objectives, (2) selecting or devising activities that are intended to bring about the learning specified by the objectives, (3) organizing these activities to the end that they bring about a maximal cumulative effect
upon the learner, and (4) evaluating the activities by determining the extent to which pupils have acquired the kinds of learning that the objectives specify.

The teacher is likely to conduct an important, interesting, and rational program to the extent that he practices a method of inquiry appropriate to the activities of planning, teaching, and evaluating. Although there are teachers who do seem to have an intuitive sense of proper aims, activities, and the like, the teacher who has neither the talents I have just mentioned nor control of a method of curriculum inquiry typically conducts a classroom characterized by routine dullness, triviality, or plain chaos.

An instructional program that is not based on a soundly conceived curricular plan is like a structure made by carpenters, bricklayers, and plasterers who do things without a clear idea of why they are doing them. Since building tradesmen don’t really work that way, we don’t see fantastic results. But the social waste of ill-planned instructional programs does go on, for such waste is not apparent to casual observation.

There are striking similarities between the general lack of linguistic knowledge and the general lack of curricular knowledge. Because people haven’t learned to think and talk about language, a typical discussion of language, as I indicated earlier, usually drifts off into a discussion of writing, or usage, or literature, or something else that people have learned to talk about. Similarly, a discussion of instructional objectives typically drifts off into a discussion of activities, or textbooks, or tests, or something else that people have learned to talk about.

Because the ends of an instructional program are basic, there can be no rational thinking and discussion of it until the ends are explicitly formulated and clearly understood. When adequately formulated, an objective specifies what patterns of thinking, aesthetic responses, and motor skills a learner is expected to acquire as a result of his taking part in a program of instruction. Statements of such objectives are criteria for selecting content, texts, methods, evaluation procedures, and the rest. For an instructional program is a means for attaining its objectives. Methods of curriculum inquiry can help teachers learn the concepts useful in thinking about instructional programs. Such understanding is a basis for productive thinking, planning, and teaching.

Further, methods of curriculum inquiry can help teachers embark on innovative projects in some systematic fashion. In classroom instruction there are four areas in which significant innovation can occur, and these are the areas into which curriculum inquiry is often divided. One is the possibility of different kinds of objectives. Another is different kinds of learning activities to serve objectives whether new or familiar. A third area of innovation concerns differences in the organization of learning activities. The fourth area is newer procedures of evaluation. There is always need for innovation in teaching, and there is increased likelihood of success when the innovator is able to see clearly a relation of his innovation to other parts of a school’s program.

One aspect of innovation is the teacher’s realizing the possibilities of creativity in his teaching. Often teachers find it productive to undertake original, creative work in conducting learning activities. For a learning activity is replaceable. That is, so long as the activity sets the learner to work at
appropriate practice of the behavior sought, that activity is sound procedure. Typically, a large number of procedures can be devised to serve any objective.

With such possibility of creative work, teachers need not become, nor need they be trained to become, mere users of textbooks, mere performers of the routine, or mere seekers after survival skills. With few exceptions, problems of discipline, problems of the school serving the slum dweller, and similar matters are essentially problems of curriculum. The curriculum specialist offers procedures for making systematic attack on such problems.

I cite three related publications as useful in helping teachers acquire this latter kind of investigative method. One is Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction by Ralph W. Tyler, currently director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences; a second is Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice by Hilda Taba of San Francisco State College, and the third is Preparing Objectives for Programmed Instruction by Robert F. Mager of Varian Associates.4 The two latter publications are obviously derived from the Tyler work, an inexpensive booklet that gives a brief but comprehensive treatment of what he calls a "... rationale by which to examine problems of curriculum and instruction." 5 Miss Taba’s book is essentially an expansion of Tyler’s booklet, and Mager’s book, an inexpensive paperback, provides instruction in preparing explicit and useful statements of instructional objectives.

The investigative method of the specialist in curriculum and instruction is relevant to the methods course, for problems of teaching are essentially problems of objectives, of means to the attainment of these, and of the evaluation of both means and the achievement of pupils. The task of a methods course, therefore, is to help the teacher learn and use the best available procedures for inquiring into those problems. Although the realities of a classroom cannot be conveyed to the student in the methods class, he can learn in that class what the fundamental problems of teaching are and what methods can help him attack those problems. Realities of the classroom change from room to room, but no matter what the classroom, no matter what the level of schooling, objectives, activities, and evaluation remain the crucial problems of instruction.

To conclude: Newer curriculums in English are attempts to bring the methods and results of scholarship to the pupil in school. The programs require, first, teachers who have control of investigative methods in composition, linguistics, literature, and curriculum inquiry. They require, second, a change in narrowly practical views and in some traditional practices. And they require, third, materials that are informed by the best available scholarship. Attempts to fulfill the promise of the newer curriculum seem justified because they exploit rather fully the rich and important content of English.


7 Tyler, op. cit. p. 2.