Is This “Trip” Necessary?

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This diabolical question of Dr. Henry’s is designed, I judge, to put the panelists in their separate corners and invite them to come out swinging. Having taught the methods course and supervised student teachers for twenty years, and having presumably a job and some royalties at stake, I seem to be automatically assigned to a defensive position. But I can straddle a fence as neatly as the next one. Perhaps I am even half hoping to be convinced by my fellow panelists that the answer to the question: “Is the methods course necessary?” is a resounding no. Then I could return with an easy conscience to teach the delightful courses in literature I have had to give up one by one in order to deal with the increasing numbers of future teachers of English. I could sleep better at night, free of those midnight phone calls which announce that one of the honor students is dropping out of student teaching, or the 6 a.m. calls when a plaintive voice announces, “My cooperating teacher wants me to teach ‘tone’ to my seventh graders at ten this morning. What shall I do?” I could lead a more tranquil life teaching George Eliot and Matthew Arnold than wringing my hands over whether Miss 1967’s extracurricular love affair is likely to result in a brilliantly planned teaching unit on “Man’s Search for Values” or an unplanned baby.

The defensive position has at least the comfort of familiarity. I can feel as though I were talking to my colleagues in the English department, who regard those of us in methods and supervision as engaged in a shady occupation at best, akin to pushing heroin or procuring. Our minority group believes that a department in a college in which eighty-five percent of the students plan to teach has some responsibility for showing a lively interest in what goes on in the public schools. We are given to understand that we might be welcomed back if we embraced the true faith and gave undivided attention to Chaucer, Joyce, or Donne. I suspect, however, that those of us who have worked with student teachers would rather remain with our pictures turned to the wall. It does not seem possible for us to ignore the crucial problems of translating content into practice, or to fail to offer what we have gleaned about teaching English to the fledgling teacher about to become a professional. At best student teaching can be exciting and rewarding for the student; at worst it can be the most traumatic experience of his life. There are heavy casualties each year, often with our most able young people. We are concerned with devoting our intellectual and human resources to keeping bright potential teachers in the profession.

We believe that an English department should say to its teaching majors: “We think you are embarked on a proud, exciting, and rewarding profession. We
believe good teachers of secondary English are as important contributors to society as the future journalists, Madison Avenue word slingers, or writers of insurance policies. You may touch more than two thousand students and become a deciding factor in their hating or loving English. It may determine whether these young people will emerge from the public schools as literate, mature adults who can read, write, and speak their language, or as those who believe that the only persons who buy books in the supermarket are English teachers."

It should be obvious by now that despite enticing visions of tranquility were I to return to "pure" teaching, I am committed, for better or worse, to the belief that the methods course and supervision, handled if possible by teachers of English, are essential in the training of English teachers. Perhaps my conviction rises from the fact that as a liberal arts B.A. and M.A. in English I never had either and was flung on my first teaching day into a class of juvenile delinquents who had just beaten up their regular teacher. That man had the sense to make a graceful exit from teaching to take up the more congenial occupation of raising flowers in a greenhouse. I did what most young teachers without methods do: I borrowed a syllabus from the teacher next door and promptly threw it out in horror at the collection of dry-as-dust insanities I was expected to teach students under the name of English. I found that I had students who wanted to read Proust, Tolstoi, and Chaucer, and I was expected to concentrate on teaching them about adverbial objectives. The poverty of answers to the questions, "What shall I teach, how shall I teach it, and above all, why?" leads most of us to a lifelong search for ways and means.

On what grounds is a methods course necessary? Principally, I think, it is necessary because most students come to it fresh from three years of liberal studies. For most of them, methods preceding student teaching is the moment of truth in their college careers.

It is at this point that the goal of teaching becomes suddenly and terrifyingly real. The passion for Joyce and Lawrence now becomes translated into the question, "What do I teach to my slow ninth graders at nine o'clock next Monday morning?" The student comes trailing clouds of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome, and suddenly realizes that he may in a few weeks be facing an urban classroom of apathetic if not downright hostile adolescents sitting it out until their sixteenth birthday. The star of the Chaucer seminar has found himself trying to teach Old Yeller over the blare of the transistor radios; a fragile blonde has found herself taking a knife away from a disturbed thirteen-year-old.

Ideally, the course should provide the teacher with some kind of theoretical framework. It should stimulate him to formulate his own philosophy of teaching English on some firmer basis than instinct or prejudice. An introduction to the major findings of research about how students learn to write, how they can be brought to read more widely and intelligently, and the exploration of effective ways of teaching language or spelling can help in the formulation of such a philosophy. Without this foundation, it is unlikely that the student will develop sound, informed convictions about how children learn or about choosing appropriate content for their learning.
This pulling together of what the student has learned in other contexts must
draw on the future teacher's knowledge about adolescent development and its
relevance to content in English. Understanding the pressing needs and interests
of young people can serve as partial criteria for the selection of content and
method in reading, writing, and speaking. The future teacher must learn to think
in terms not only of what he is burning to teach but of what the teenager may
be burning to learn or can hopefully be led to learn if he is to become fully adult,
fully mature, fully human.

As he plans lessons and units, the future teacher must learn to see the poem,
the novel, or the lesson in composition as one step in a sequence of studies and to
think about each lesson as part of a sequential curriculum or as a concept in a
spiral curriculum which will be reinforced at later grade levels with different
approaches and more complex materials. He must recall or relearn his knowledge
about how young people learn and about the differences between levels of
intellectual development and between skills and problem solving. He must learn
the ways in which young people can discover complex concepts, the differences
between inductive and deductive methods, the values of problem solving
approaches.

Our department is willing to allow two semester hours for a five-week course
meeting every day prior to student teaching. The student has studied linguistics
but has never thought of how one might translate Chomsky into terms an eighth
grader might understand. He himself is in a state of Adamic innocence about
traditional grammar. Although he has written themes, he has never graded them
nor considered the varying standards of evaluation of composition that might be
used in grades seven through twelve. He is adept at analyzing Melville's symbol-
ism in Moby Dick but unable to understand the teenager who thinks that novel
is really about whales and whaling, or one who reads at the fifth grade level. The
only way he can think of to introduce poetry is to ask the students to memorize
the definitions of figures of speech and the meters and to look for them in "The
Ancient Mariner." His Shakespeare course has carefully analyzed King Lear but
not Hamlet; Measure for Measure but not Macbeth or Julius Caesar. All we have
to do in five weeks is to teach all these things. These remarks are not to be
interpreted as a plea for teaching methodology in content courses but as a re-
mindcr that two or three semester hours is a very brief time in which to discuss
them.

Much of this can be learned not in lecture but in a class context in which
students engage in blitz teaching, or what they call Project Miniteach. Each
student prepares a two- to three-minute fragment of a lesson: how to teach one
spelling word, one vocabulary word, one metaphor or image in a poem. After
five or six such lessons in an hour, the class has learned much from questions
raised about whether the level of usage is appropriate to the seventh grade,
whether the lecture method is best for ninth graders, or how students might
respond to the kinds of questions the teacher is using.

Another essential concern of the methods course is to start students thinking
about the old question, What is English? Although the best brains of the MLA
and NCTE have wrestled with this problem of definition, it is usually new to the
student teacher. He has rarely thought about the boundaries of his subject and needs to be forced to discuss and define it. Should English include materials from the humanities, speech, social science? All of the questions can be discussed in context as the student plans lessons and units. As he begins to sense the amazing inclusiveness of the subject he has elected to teach, he also begins to evaluate his own qualifications as a teacher: Do I know enough about language and how it develops in the young? Enough about semantics to help young people understand how language affects human relations? Enough about the books young people read to direct their reading? Enough about composition to tell good writing from bad and to discern the spark of promise in the muddled prose of the young writer?

A third question for continuous discussion needs to be that of the aims in teaching English. These need to be defined and redefined. Again, the student has rarely thought about them. He knows he must teach grammar, but what grammar and why? He wants to teach students to love literature, but often he interprets this as teaching Joyce's *Ulysses* in the tenth grade or repeating the lecture from his graduate seminar in his ninth grade honors class. In the methods shakedown cruise, much must be examined and cast overboard: the unexamined prescriptions of high school and college teachers (never begin a sentence with *and*; never split an infinitive; never use *like* as a conjunction). If aims are clear and meaningful, much about selection of content and method will fall into line. If one's aim is to produce readers instead of myth and symbol hunters who never read, one will choose and teach accordingly. If one's aim in teaching usage is to bring each child as far as he can go in the mastery of the standard dialect and a flexible command of his language, he will teach differently than if he believes that teaching should consist of memorizing a list of "correct" forms.

Fourth, it seems to help students to be thrust into an intensive search and discussion of the things experienced English teachers look for all their lives: specific suggestions about fruitful ways to teach language, literature, and composition. The beginning teacher learns at the end of the course that he is just beginning to ask the right questions, to start on the long search for ways of challenging the indifferent, ways of finding and showing his students the many interrelationships within his discipline.

I am sure there is no ideal time, structure, or content for the methods course. Sometimes I think it would mean more to students if we could give it after they have done their student teaching. Only then can they know what they really need to know and want to learn. The methods course clearly asks the impossible of both teacher and student. Yet my feeling about it is echoed by many young teachers who have tried the road without it. As one says, "Believe me, it's better with." We should adopt for our motto the excelsior cry of the armed forces: "The difficult we do right away; the impossible takes a little longer."