Toward Restructuring the English Curriculum

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The title of this paper was originally to have been "Toward Structuring the English Curriculum"; however, such a title implies that the English curriculum is presently without structure and this implication is not supported by fact. Indeed, English teachers have for years been functioning within highly structured situations, some of which have yielded commendable tangible results. But English, like all other subject fields, has been affected by a number of social variables which have already led to some significant restructuring and which will, in the next decade or two, bring about such astounding changes in the overall educational scene that the elements which constitute the broad area of English will likely be assigned to diverse areas outside the general framework of what are now designated English departments.

The two most notable variables which daily force educators to rethink the structures of their disciplines are on the one hand the almost frightening proliferation of material and knowledge within broad subject areas and on the other hand the changing needs of a nation which has rapidly modified its orientation from agricultural and rural to industrial and urban. Much curricular restructuring has already taken place: not many years ago course work in education, psychology, and sociology was offered by university departments of philosophy. As each of these subareas of philosophy became more highly specialized, it became autonomous from the mother department and in essence ceased to be a subarea of the subject field which had originally nurtured it. As a separate subject area, psychology, for example, is in most instances at present more closely akin to medicine than it is to the discipline from which it sprang. Whereas at the turn of the century a professor of philosophy might have taught psychology, ethics, and the history of philosophy as a matter of course, such a combination would be virtually unthinkable today at even the smallest and least prestigious schools in the country.

When we view the field of English today, we view a mother field in a position comparable to that of philosophy around 1900. English embraces a staggering variety of subareas, especially at the high school level and to a lesser extent at the college and university levels. At the high school level an English teacher, who usually is required to have had between thirty and thirty-six semester credits of English in college in order to qualify for secondary school certification, is regularly called upon to teach grammar, composition, literature, drama, speech, journalism, reading, creative writing, and numerous other subareas which fall...
within the broad and general domain of English. The average Ph.D. in English would decline any position which demanded him to function with at least minimal expertness in all of the areas listed above, yet the college graduate who wishes to teach in secondary schools must be prepared to accept assignments in this broad range of subareas if he is to be employed. And often he does not know until the first day of school what he will be teaching. He must develop early in his career an unusual degree of skill in becoming an expert, often in more than one area, overnight. He often must become as well an expert in killing his conscience, which in view of his unavoidable feelings of inadequacy might tend to get in the way of his professional functioning.

Any full scale restructuring of a field as broad as English will probably have to begin at the college and university levels, whence it will gradually begin to take hold in the schools as the higher institutions continue to produce those who will teach in elementary and secondary schools. It is my expectation that the overall structure of the college and university will be more drastically reevaluated and more startlingly altered in the next two decades than it has been since the inception of universities in medieval Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The ultimate result of this restructuring will be that the entire focus of many disciplines will be significantly modified and that these modifications will eventually be felt and reflected at all levels of education. The most positive and beneficial effect which will accrue to the secondary school will probably be that its teaching personnel will be more specifically trained than ever before for the teaching which they are hired to do. School districts which once had fifty English teachers will, in all probability, eventually have instead twenty teachers of literature, ten teachers of grammar, ten teachers of composition, three teachers of reading, three teachers of speech, two teachers of drama, and two teachers of journalism. The breakdown will not be exactly as given here, but a breakdown into specialized areas will be made, and the generalist in English and in other fields will be virtually unknown. The growth of consolidated schools and the virtual disappearance of small community high schools has already made such specialization more of a reality than it was two decades ago.

In 1960 Albert Kitzhaber, Robert Gorrell, and Paul Roberts made a significant study of the public high schools in Portland, Oregon. An examination of teachers' transcripts revealed how little formal preparation teachers in the Portland schools had for the specific teaching they were doing. Among English teachers, for example, an examination of 143 college transcripts "revealed that only 60 of these teachers had had more than nine quarter credits in courses in composition or language—and nine credits are usually offered in the standard freshman English course, which generally is worthless as professional preparation. Only 19 of the 60 had had a total of more than fifteen quarter hours in courses of this sort."1 Similarly deficient were teachers of speech, only 26 of 143 having received credit for more than six quarter hours of work in speech at the college level.2 The Portland situation is not by any means an isolated one; indeed, the

2Ibid., p. 95.
Portland schools are generally considered stronger than the national average. A study similar in essence to the Portland study but focusing on 1,200 junior high school teachers of English in Wisconsin is now being undertaken by Leonard V. Kosinski, and when it is published will probably present statistics even more startling than those reported by Kitzhaber, Gorrell, and Roberts.

I have often said in public and do not hesitate to venture to say here that probably not one teacher in ten who is presently teaching grammar in the secondary school is qualified by training or experience to teach grammar and is, in all likelihood, not teaching grammar at all but rather linguistic etiquette. The average English teacher of today at any level is a teacher of literature by training; because English is usually his native tongue, he is deemed competent to teach the intricacies of its grammar. And most administrators, parents, and other non-experts who have a voice in influencing curriculum are convinced that there is a direct relationship between learning grammar and learning how to write and speak effectively, even though convincing evidence to this effect is lacking and contrary evidence is presented almost daily by those who work most intimately and thoughtfully in the field of English. Note well that there is an enormous difference between “learning grammar” (rules) and understanding the structure of a language.

In view of the nature of the social change which is undeniably taking place now in the United States and which will continue at a highly accelerated rate between now and the end of the century, I feel that I can confidently predict a dizzying increase in the number of publicly supported urban colleges and universities which will be created to meet the needs of an increasingly technological society centered in urban areas. This increase, which will be necessitated by both social and economic pressures, is bound to give rise to a new type of college and university, the curricula of which will be uniquely designed to meet the needs of the communities which they serve. The traditional faculties of the medieval university—Philosophy, Medicine, Law, and Theology—were uniquely designed to serve the needs of a society poised between medievalism and the rebirth of knowledge which the Renaissance represented. As the vestiges of medievalism faded from society at large, the form and organizational structure of the medieval university was preserved essentially, being modified to meet the needs of a dynamically changing society only by the addition of courses and disciplines to the curriculum, but not changing the overall structure in such a way that the essential medievalism of institutions of higher learning has ever been fully overcome.

The future structure of the discipline now designated “English” is so intimately involved with the future organizational structure of the college and university, and especially, it seems to me, with the organizational structure of the urban college and university that I find it impossible to discuss the subject narrowly. It is my serious contention and my fervent hope that the field of

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4 For a discussion of this topic see Bernard Baum’s “Some Thoughts on Teaching Grammar to Improve Writing,” College Composition and Communication, XVIII (1967), 2-6. See also Paul Roberts’ “Linguistics and the Teaching of Composition,” Linguistics in the Classroom (National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 29.
English will undergo the sort of division that the field of philosophy has undergone. The impetus for this is more likely to come from the urban university than from any other source. The resultant change will inevitably be seen and felt at all levels of education.

To outline fully the sorts of curricular change which I foresee is not possible here. I can only point out that it is reasonably estimated by demographers that by 1980, only thirteen years from now, 180 million people will be dwelling in over 200 urban centers throughout the United States. Each of these urban centers will have its peculiar needs and most of these centers will be served by urban colleges and universities which will be supported only by a public which is convinced that such schools can in some demonstrable way work towards meeting peculiar local needs. Business and industry will bear a large portion of the financial brunt of supporting urban colleges and universities but will accept this responsibility willingly and eagerly if assured that the community and the businesses and industries within it will prosper through the growth of such schools. The business community will balk, and quite justifiably so, if it is forced through taxation to support an educational complex which does not provide it with the trained personnel which it requires in order to function efficiently and profitably.

The colleges and universities which are likely to emerge from this dramatically changing social situation will have little choice but to consider all sorts of innovative means of providing the sort of education which our age increasingly demands. It is my expectation that some of these schools will be structured essentially as a community of centers devoted to the study of various pressing social concerns and the teaching of subject matter which will bear some direct relationship to the possible means of meeting these concerns. Under such a restructuring, the conventional English department would disappear from the academic scene.

This is not to imply that the teaching of English would be abandoned. Rather, the elements of which English is now composed would be taught in a much more specialized manner than ever before. I would expect, for example, that a fundamental center at any college or university would be a center for the study of communication. Within this center I would expect to find a broad gamut of courses in composition ranging from the usual freshman composition type of course to advanced courses in expository writing and in teaching English to non-native speakers. The staff, of whom probably not more than ten percent would possess doctorates, would have been schooled well in composition, anthropology, and psychology as these fields pertain to communication. Composition courses would not be staffed, as they so often are at present, by candidates for doctorates in literature who are dragged kicking and screaming into the classroom to teach a subject which most of them have not themselves studied or given serious thought to since they were college freshmen. The instructors would have a strong grounding in modern grammar as well as in writing; many of them would be part-time instructors who hold positions outside the higher institution which require them to write. In this center for the study of communication would also be offered courses in areas such as journalism, computer programming, public speaking, technical writing, and basic foreign language instruction. The staff
would be headed by people with doctorates in their disciplines and these people would be active in planning the curriculum. However, most of the teaching would be done by those below the doctoral level. The essential functions of the people in the program above that level would be to experiment, to structure instructional programs, and to direct the course of the curriculum.

The center for the study of the humanities would be an essential part of the newly conceived institution which I envision. Such a center would be staffed more fully with Ph.D.'s than would the center for the study of communication. The instruction offered would be largely upper division and graduate. There would be a larger proportion of full-time, tenured faculty members in this center than in the center for the study of communication. Advanced language courses focusing more upon foreign cultures, their literature, and philosophy than upon language would constitute part of the offerings, as would courses in English, American, and Commonwealth literature, courses in the history of philosophy, history, religion, and the like.

In the center for the study of the arts one would find courses in art history, painting, music, drama, creative writing, and other related fields. Many of these courses would be staffed by those actively engaged in the arts, some of whom would be brought in for two or three week periods during which they would essentially be artists in residence giving public lectures and small seminars. The staffing of this center would be severely hampered were it necessary to hire all staff for a full semester or quarter. Imaginative scheduling would be more vital here than in most of the other centers.

A center for urban studies would be fundamental to nearly any urban college or university, and this center would draw on community resources as fully as possible for staffing. Each such center would be geared to the geographical area which it serves and would have a direct tie with the businesses and industries of that area, through which extensive internship periods would be arranged for students working towards baccalaureate degrees. In this center the student would be introduced to a broad spectrum of courses ranging from architecture and civil engineering to social work, economics, and transportation. This center would be closely allied to many of the other centers within the school and would work in cooperation with them. Its most direct tie would probably be with the center for the study of commerce and industry, which would be a fundamental part of most urban colleges and universities.

Within the complex suggested for the urban university, the scope of professional schools would be broad. Within what is now the medical school would be trained all manner of medical personnel ranging from psychiatric social workers, medical technologists, nurses, and pharmacists to practicing and research physicians. Medicine has already gone further than most disciplines in creating the broad sort of center which I have in mind and would probably be the center within the university which would undergo the smallest amount of organizational change under the scheme which I propose. Indeed, in many cases, it would be the medical school which would provide the model for the reorganization and restructuring of the other divisions within the university.

The outline proposed here is conceived to create a true community of
scholars since there would necessarily be much more overlap of the various centers than there now is of the various schools within a traditional university. Interdisciplinary interaction would, in the most ideal circumstances, spawn a new type of “renaissance man,” competent within a great many diverse fields.

Change is a frightening thing to the average person. Educators who would be innovative are particularly aware of the popular resistance to change within social institutions, yet most of them realize that the institution which does not change to meet human needs will ultimately cease to exist. The Orphic religion in ancient Greece, for example, began a serious decline because it required that priests, who were alleged to be reincarnations of Dionysus, be sacrificed and eaten by the faithful, who would thereby be purified. An understandable shortage of candidates for the Orphic priesthood made it almost impossible for the religion to continue. However, when it was recalled that Dionysus was often reincarnated as a bull, and when it was decided that the act of purification could be just as valid if a bull were sacrificed, the religion had faced an existing reality, and it flourished for many centuries more. Those who administer any social institution—religious, educational, or otherwise—must accept as a major responsibility of their offices the mandate to spearhead such change as is necessary to keep their organizations vital and realistic.

Jerome Bruner comes to the heart of the matter when he writes, “As our technology grows increasingly complex in both machinery and human organization, the role of the school becomes more central in the society, not simply as an agent of socialization, but as a transmitter of basic skills. To this we turn...as our final basis for redefining education—the changing society.”5 Bruner, tacitly agreeing with Henry Ford, who long ago declared that history is bunk, calls for a shift away from history towards the social or behavioral sciences,6 and in so doing implicitly gives some hope of those of us in English, for we have already witnessed in two major branches of our field such a shift. Literary criticism, since the emergence of the New Critics, has become increasingly less historical and more analytical or, to use Bruner’s term, behavioral. The new grammar may also be looked upon as essentially behavioral. This is the grammar which demands its students to analyze rather than memorize, and this is much to the good.

If one would criticize the new grammar, he would likely do so on two bases: first, it is strange and unfamiliar to those who have been trained traditionally; and second, it is not concerned with correctness and incorrectness. Resistance to the new grammar comes essentially from those who have thought that they were learning or teaching grammar when in reality they were learning or teaching usage. The teaching of grammar as such requires an orientation to which only the smallest minority of teachers in our country has been exposed.

Those who resist the New Criticism often do so because they have never really understood literature and its most important literary component, style. They find that they are much more secure when they are discussing the birth and death dates of authors and the publication dates of the editions of their works than they

are when they engage in a close reading of those works. Stephen Judy points very clearly to this in a recent article in which he notes that "in one current ninth-grade text...of 139 'questions for discussion' following a dozen short stories, only three are aimed at discussion of style." Such a statement is shocking but is very nearly universally true. Were any of us to select at random any five high school literature anthologies from the shelf of any curriculum library and run an analysis similar to Mr. Judy's, I doubt that our results would be much more encouraging than his.

The whole question of change is a very current one in our age. Social and technological change demands radical change at every level. Eric Hoffer in his seminal book, The Ordeal of Change, comments that "no one really likes the new...We can never be really prepared for that which is wholly new. We have to adjust ourselves, and every radical adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem." This generally being the case, teachers of today, along with their students, often face crises which threaten their self-esteem. Yet one can hardly deny John Dewey's admonition that "the only true education comes through stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself." A curriculum static either in content or organization cannot serve the student at a time when his world is caught up in the sort of cataclysmic change which has brought us from the horse-and-buggy era to the era of lunar exploration in less than a century.

Teachers more than any other group of people in our society must realize the cogency of Joseph Schwab's statement that "the dependence of knowledge on a conceptual structure means that any body of knowledge is likely to be of only temporary significance. For the knowledge which develops from the use of a given concept usually discloses new complexities of the subject matter which will call forth new concepts." No teacher in our society can honestly or legitimately take upon himself the responsibility of guarding the gate with the sort of canine ferocity which I have seen exhibited by so many teachers who are actively resistant to change. Such people are denying progress and are essentially permitting personal insecurity to stand in the way of the ongoing continuum, the Heraclitean flow, which in our time more than in any past era is inevitable and, in the long run, irresistible.

The changing role of the teacher must be regularly assessed in a society as dynamic as ours. Education today cannot be aimed at imbuing the student with a sense of duty and obedience. Our society needs independent citizens who are capable of action based upon reason, knowledge, and analysis. We are an activist society, but education as we know it in the humanities is essentially not activist. If education is truly a form of human growth, then one must give ear to Jerome

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Bruner’s statement that “growth is characterized by increasing independence of response from the immediate nature of the stimulus.”

The teacher becomes the guide, the person who structures the material with which he works “so that it can be most readily grasped by the learner.”

Generalized structure and sequence are suggested by nearly every high school textbook or by the accompanying teachers’ guides. However, the teacher in the immediate situation must adapt generalized constructs to a specific milieu. This means that he must understand his students and their environments as fully as possible. This probably means also that he will seldom teach from the podium in the front of a classroom, that he will seldom lecture. He will nudge his students, rather, into discovery and into self-fulfillment. He will subjugate his own ego in order to guide his students towards the development of a self-concept which will make them wish to function throughout their lifetimes on an intellectual plane higher than they might have aspired to initially.

The effective structuring of material within any curriculum depends upon the person who is doing the structuring. One cannot structure effectively nor in any long-term way that which he does not himself grasp comprehensively. If English programs are today severely lacking, the cause would appear to me to be that the term “English teacher” is too comprehensive. With the proliferation of material in the subareas of English, no one can aspire to be an “English teacher” in any inclusive sense. Our English teachers of today are, for the most part, being inefficiently and ineffectively used. They exhaust themselves performing tasks which they are not equipped by training to perform and they end each day weary, disgruntled, and humiliated. What Eric Hoffer points out about the workingman is true of people in any field of endeavor: “A workingman sure of his skill goes leisurely about his job and accomplishes much though he works as if at play. On the other hand, the workingman new to his trade attacks his work as if he were saving the world, and he must do so if he is to get anything done at all.”

The English teacher who is working outside his field of specialization is as the workingman new to his trade. His output of energy is increased while his effectiveness and productivity are decreased.

Education is not a genteel game. It is the most serious concern of our age and the stakes in this serious game are the highest for which man can possibly play: human minds and human souls. Educators cannot procrastinate in a world whose growth and development have become so accelerated in the space of half a century that well educated people of a decade ago will be functional illiterates a decade hence unless they continue their educations to the extent of learning, for example, the third element of literacy, the effective use of computers. Whether we like or dislike the dynamism of our society, whether we do or do not approve of the rapid change of which we are necessarily a part, has no bearing upon this change. Rapid change is inevitable. Through it we can be exalted or destroyed. The world is moving at breakneck speed. We cannot stop the world even if we have the feeling sometimes that we really would like to get off.

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11 Bruner, op. cit., p. 5.
12 Ibid., p. 41.
13 Hoffer, op. cit., p. 2.