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FROM THE BASIC ISSUES CONFERENCE TO THE DARTMOUTH SEMINAR--PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH.

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THE ASSUMPTIONS, PROCEDURES, AND IMPACT OF THE 1958 CONFERENCE ON BASIC ISSUES IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AND THE DARTMOUTH SEMINAR OF 1966 ARE COMPARED. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE EARLIER CONFERENCE AND THE ISSUES RAISED THEN INDICATE THE WAYS IN WHICH IT WAS BOTH REPRESENTATIVE OF ITS TIMES AND PROPHETIC OF FUTURE PROBLEMS. THREE SHIFTS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SCENE--INFLUENCED BY JEROME BRUNER'S "THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION," THE INCREASING ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN AMERICAN EDUCATION, AND A "REDISCOVERY" OF THE AMERICAN LOWER CLASS AND THE SHARP DIFFERENTIATION AMONG CLASS DIALECTS--PROVIDED A QUITE DIFFERENT SETTING TO THE DARTMOUTH SEMINAR. DESPITE MANY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE CONCERNS OF THE TWO CONFERENCES, THE INFLUENCE OF THESE THREE CHANGES IS REFLECTED IN SOME CONCLUSIONS OF THE DARTMOUTH SEMINAR. (1) WITH RESPECT TO LITERATURE, THE CONTENT-CENTERED APPROACH OF THE BASIC ISSUES CONFERENCE WAS REPLACED BY EMPHASES ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND INVOLVEMENT AND ON A CONCEPT OF ENGLISH AS AN OPERATIONAL DISCIPLINE. (2) THE IDEA OF IMPOSING A STATIC AND EXTERNAL CURRICULUM ON THE SCHOOLS SOLELY IN THE INTEREST OF CONTINUITY WAS REJECTED. (3) BECAUSE A SOUND, CONSCIOUS KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT, TEACHERS NEED TO BE RETRAINED AND THE CURRICULUM REVISED. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "PMLA," VOLUME 82, NUMBER 4, SEPTEMBER 1967, PAGES 8-13. (BN)

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FROM THE BASIC ISSUES CONFERENCE TO THE DARTMOUTH SEMINAR: PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH*

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IT HAS been said with some justice that during the past one hundred years committees have functioned as the task forces of American educational reform. It might also have been added that the preliminary scouting or reconnaissance has been accomplished through the device of the conference. It is quite likely, therefore, that a comparison of the aims, organization, and outlook of the Basic Issues Conference of 1958 and the Dartmouth Seminar of 1966 will serve to place in some kind of perspective the significant trends in English teaching which are taking place in the country today and which may continue to be influential for some time to come.

In order to do justice to the assignment, however, I must begin at a point somewhat prior to the earlier of these two gatherings. The year was 1957. It was a bitterly cold and icy day in January, the kind that makes travel both by air and by road hazardous in the extreme. I had been summoned to attend a hastily convened meeting of the English members of the MLA Executive Council. My plane was late, my taxi driver both intrepid and unaccustomed to negotiating glare ice. When I finally did arrive at the association headquarters in a state of nervous exhaustion, I found four of my MLA colleagues already there, each one busily scanning one of the NCTE Curriculum Series, the first three volumes of which were already in print. The silence was punctuated by occasional anguished groans and grasps of incredulity. In particular, that portion dealing with the core curriculum seemed to exercise all the fascination of a loose tooth.

As the day wore on, however, it became possible to place some of the educational doctrine in its proper context, to explain some of the unfamiliar terminology, even to account for it in part, and to make the point that with respect to core, the authors had taken a somewhat conservative point of view. It must be remembered that the college professor had an air of touching innocence about him in those days, at least as far as education on the lower levels was concerned.

Although I was not present, there may well have been a complementary episode in the offices of the National Council. One can easily imagine some of the effective teachers of the very young recoiling in horror at the aridities of one issue or another of *PMLA* with its dogged pursuit of historical bagatelles, its mystique of the New Criticism then just past its zenith, and the unintelligible prose of the structural linguists. No doubt they wondered what manner of person spent his days on matters such as these. It is even probable that the upper echelon of the College English Association, also in solemn conclave, was crying, "A plague on both your houses."

What was under discussion at this time was a proposed Cooperative English Program which would have as its purpose a strengthening of the place of English in the schools and colleges of the country and a revitalization of its teaching. It was hoped that some foundation would sense the importance of such a project and support it on a generous scale.

The timing is easily explained. Although Sputnik I was still nine months in the future, concern over American education had been mounting. Arthur Bestor had already fired two of his broadsides. Moreover, the Modern Language Association was flushed with triumph, and justifiably so, over the success of its Foreign Language Program, then almost five years old and the recipient of a renewed foundation grant What could seem more reasonable than a second onslaught, this time upon the subject which engaged the majority of its membership. It was equally clear, however, that so ambitious a project as this was more than any single organization could undertake. It would have to be cooperative. Consequently the National Council of Teachers of English, the College English Association, and the American Studies Association were all brought into the picture.

I mention these preliminary maneuvers only to make the point that even the preparatory stages of the Basic Issues Conference were marked by a disposition to work together on the part of those in control of the major professional organizations having to do with English teaching. The initial meeting I have

* An address given at the meeting of the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English in New York, 28 December 1966.

described was followed by a preliminary planning conference which brought together representatives from all four associations, and a harmonious cooperation which began at that time was continued to the present. Indeed it has grown, involving larger numbers of their membership every year. We would not be meeting here today, were this not the case.

Despite its promising beginning, the proposal for a Cooperative English Program fell upon foundation ears which, if not deaf, were at least notably hard of hearing. We lacked the appeal of the sciences and the gimmickry of technology. The plan we outlined fell short of attempting to upset the entire educational establishment. As a consequence we were invited to undertake an exploration of the issues rather than to set into motion a research and development program, and in the typical foundation fashion, the suggestion of bigger things to come was the carrot that dangled at the end of the stick. This is how the series of Conferences on Basic Issues in the Teaching of English came into being.

For the benefit of those whose memories do not carry them back eight years, I shall rehearse the facts briefly. A group of twenty-eight, drawn from all levels of the English-teaching profession, private institutions as well as public, administration and teacher-training as well as classroom instruction, met on four occasions for a total of ten days to undertake a formulation of the basic issues confronting the profession, presumably as a preliminary step to "a thorough re-examination of the whole problem of the teaching of English from the elementary grades through the graduate school."

There were some flaws in the organization and procedures, more apparent now, of course, than they seemed at the time. Colleges were too heavily represented. There was only one linguist, and as chairman of the conference he was gagged and immobilized—or nearly so. Except for one day, all the sessions were plenary. Nevertheless, the participants accepted the charge, worked manfully at their task, and reached an impressive amount of agreement which was reflected in the report of the conference, a document entitled, "The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English," published simultaneously in the journals of all four sponsoring organizations.

It is only fair to say that had the published outcome of the conference gone beyond defining and clarifying thirty-five important issues, had it for example attempted to arrive at a specific point of view or suggested solutions for any considerable number of them, there would not have been so much consensus. But it was not merely an excess of caution that led the participants away from definitive answers and conclusive stands. It was the realization first that they did not know the answers, lacking any experimental evidence upon which to base them, and second that answers would, to a large degree, depend upon the educational context in which the issue was raised.

Nevertheless, despite some grumbling, when it appeared, about vague generalities issuing from the mouths of a self-appointed Establishment, the document had, I believe, many positive values. It did reflect the thoughtful collaboration of persons representing independent schools, colleges of education, and school and college administrators, as well as university professors of English. American literature had powerful voices in Henry Nash Smith, Willard Thorp, and William Charvat. As I have indicated, it was only linguistics that was reduced to a whisper, but this did not materially affect the outcome.

Moreover, the choice of the issues that were posed was an important factor in communicating the kinds of concerns, and behind this the attitudes characteristic of the group. The very fact that certain questions were asked was in itself significant, and so was the way in which the issues were presented. The very first of the thirty-five will serve as an illustration:

> 1. What is "*English*"? We agree generally that English composition, language, and literature are within our province, but we are uncertain whether our boundaries should include world literature in translation, public speaking, journalism, listening, remedial reading, and general academic orientation. Some of these activities admittedly promote the social development of the individual. But does excessive emphasis on them result in the neglect of that great body of literature which can point the individual's development in more significant directions? Has the fundamental liberal discipline of English been replaced, at some levels of schooling, by *ad hoc* training in how to write a letter, how to give a radio speech, manners, dating, telephoning, vocational guidance?

True enough, there is a sort of neutrality about the outward form. Yet it is fair to say that the way in which the issue was posed betrays something of an inner tendentiousness. Just as important as the questions that were asked were those which did not appear in the

document but which might have, had the problem in its totality been considered by a different group or at another time. The third issue, for example, asks whether certain literary works should be required at each of the various school levels in a basic program. Nowhere does one find the question whether, in this particular age, given the nature of our society with its newer media of communication, literature should be taught at all.

In short the Basic Issues report was representative of its own time, reflecting the revolt of the mid-fifties against the professional educators who, by that time, were coming to be semantically blackballed by the pejorative term *educationist*. By implication also, the report trained its guns and fired its cannon at the already crumbling walls of the Progressive Education fortress. It was clearly content-centered, emphasizing a set of skills and a body of knowledge. It assumed that these could be taught—and learned—sequentially and cumulatively. It even raised the question of national standards for student writing.

At the same time, lest I give the impression of a quaint archaism surrounding the entire effort, I should point out that it was prophetic in a number of ways. The twenty-first issue inquired, "Can the requirements for the Ph.D. degree in English be clarified and standardized?" The thirty-fifth asked, "Is there a special need in the English profession for a degree intermediate between the master's and the doctor's degree?" I do not need to tell you that these are still moot questions. Even now the Modern Language Association is engaged in a nationwide survey of the doctorate in English, and those of you who were in this room for the preceding session heard Professor Don Cameron Allen give the first report on it.

An entire block of the Basic Issues report, consisting of eleven items, dealt with the preparation and certification of teachers. Again this looked forward to the cooperative English Teacher Preparation Study, which has been under way for the past eighteen months under a collaborative sponsorship involving both MLA and NCTE and is now approaching completion.

I must confess, however, that in one respect the conferences and the report that emanated from them failed in their intended purpose. No foundation was sufficiently impressed by the quality of thought and the freshness of point of view that it consented to open its gold hoard, either for further investigation or for experimentation and development. Two years of repeated effort, devising and presenting projects, modifying them, presenting them again, were fruitless. When we contented ourselves with broad outlines, we were told to be more specific, and when we tried to be specific, we were told to think in broad and general terms. In the end we concluded that no one loved us—or English, for that matter. Ultimately we were to succeed in many of the things that we felt needed to be done, but it was in a way that no one foresaw at the time.

Nevertheless the report made its impact in other ways. The fundamental questions about English teaching that it raised are clearly reflected in two of the most significant books on the subject that have appeared: ***Freedom and Discipline in English***, a report of the Commission on English, and ***The College Teaching of English***, the final volume of the NCTE Curriculum Series. Both volumes appeared in 1965, each of them, however, after a long period of preparation. It would be mistaken, perhaps, to claim direct influences, but in each instance the approach and attitude appear to build on the questions raised by the Basic Issues Conference.

Between 1958 and 1966 there were profound shifts in the educational scene, one philosophic, one social, and one political. In combination these were destined to provide a quite different setting for the Dartmouth Seminar from that which had prevailed eight years earlier.

The Process of Education by Jerome Bruner appeared in 1962. As everyone knows, Bruner's work has influenced educational thinking profoundly. I shall not deal with his theories in detail but merely suggest some of their effects. His emphasis upon structure, though not denying the importance of content, has led to a quest for underlying pattern. His concept of the spiral approach served to focus attention once more upon the learner rather than the teacher and to emphasize the importance of a design for learning. The employment, though by no means original with him, of the distinction between cognitive and affective mental processes made a strong impact upon the Dartmouth Seminar and ultimately affected its conclusions to a profound degree.

The social event to which I have referred, to put it bluntly and perhaps over-dramatically, was the rediscovery of the American lower class. During this period a number of events combined to disabuse us of the notion that we were simply one vast and relatively undiffer-

entiated middle class—with gradations within it certainly, but essentially middle. I need merely mention them. The increasing incidence of school dropouts, reaping its harvest of unemployment and juvenile crime. Racial conflict especially in the urban centers, fixing our attention upon miserable living conditions and lack of both educational and employment opportunities. Our realization that various kinds of aptitude and achievement tests appear to be middle-class oriented and thus unfair to children from culturally deprived surroundings is just another instance of our heightened awareness of the extremes of the social spectrum. And as a part of our exploration into the various facets of the lower sector of our society, we learned how sharply differentiated our class dialects were—an intriguing discovery to the linguistic geographer, but a shattering one to the social ameliorist. Interest in American regional dialects goes back to the founding of the American Dialect Society in 1889. The first conference on urban dialects was held in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1964, seventy-five years later. It was supported by U. S. Office of Education funds.

This last comment brings me to my third point, the increasing role of the federal government in American education. With respect to English this came about in a peculiar manner; we got in through a side door, so to speak. Foreign languages were among the first recipients of direct categorical aid, through the mechanism of the National Defense Education Act, so what the MLA had begun in 1952 was now continued from Washington, and, fortunately, the profession was able to furnish the trained manpower to carry it on. But the claims of English as a vital factor in National Defense were somewhat less apparent to the Congress, although the NCTE had tried to make a case for it with its monograph *The National Interest and the Teaching of English.* But, as I have said, there was a side door.

In the Office of Education, the Cooperative Research Program had begun in a small way to sponsor small pedagogical research projects. Influenced partly by the kind of research which became possible under NDEA and partly by new leadership within the Office, the Cooperative Research Program expanded the scope of its projects and managed to acquire substantial increases in funds to support them. It was as a part of this enlargement that Project English was inaugurated in 1962. At present this consists in the main of twenty-five government-financed projects, most of them falling into the category known as Curriculum Study Centers. Sixteen of them are concerned with the development of English curricula and teaching materials for various ranges of the school system. Two of them even cover the entire thirteen years. Four programs are concerned with English as a second language and the development of bilingual readers. There are others which have to do with reading, with literacy materials, with teaching the deaf, and with teacher preparation.

These curriculum study centers are usually situated in a university and directed by someone on the university faculty who has been released from all or some of his teaching duties, as are other members of the center staff. They cooperate closely with English teachers from the surrounding area through workshops and planning sessions. Materials are produced cooperatively and are tried out in the schools of the cooperating teachers. Time forbids a more detailed description of what has gone on and what has been produced. Such information is available in a summary progress report published by the National Council. Many of the materials are quite revolutionary, and the overall planning likewise reflects a number of new directions in English instruction. What is of even greater significance, however, is that these study centers have brought together college and school people on a hitherto undreamed of scale and that hundreds of teachers have been actively involved in matters which up to now had been the primary concern of a few curriculum experts and textbook authors. In short, a critical, professional public is in the making.

It was with these three developments in the background that the Dartmouth Seminar convened in August of this year. The seminar itself operated upon a broadened base, bringing together not just Americans representing all levels of English instruction but Britons and Canadians as well. The newly-formed National Association for the Teaching of English, a United Kingdom organization, joined NCTE and MLA in sponsoring the project. Some twenty persons from England were in attendance. Though slightly outnumbered by their American colleagues, they made up for the difference by their forcefulness of expression. It was assumed that in the light of the many serious problems facing the English profession in England and America, different in nature and extent though they may be, an international

discussion of them might lead to clarification, might suggest solutions, might develop some new approaches and new avenues of cooperation.

In several respects the Dartmouth Seminar represented an improvement in organization and operation over the Basic Issues Conference. It included more people with an active interest in elementary education. There were eight linguists, four each from England and America, in contrast to the sole representative of the field at the Basic Issues Conference. Moreover, by this time the college and university members of the group were much more familiar with the school situation than they had been eight years before. Consultants reflecting associated or ancillary areas of interest were used liberally. Participants were divided into working parties and study groups of various sizes, the former for the consideration of general questions, and the latter for the examination of very specific problems. By having the entire group examine actual samples of student writing and evaluate a particular poem, the seminar was held to a consideration of the specific. There were plenary sessions, but they did not dominate the organization of the seminar. In short, we had learned a great deal about working plans and methods during the eight intervening years.

There has been one news release about the conclusions of the conference, but the detailed findings and recommendations of the seminar will be presented in two books, one for the general public to be written by Professor Herbert J. Muller of Indiana University, and the other, addressed to the profession, to be prepared by John Dixon of the Bretton Hall College of Education in Yorkshire. Both are now in manuscript and should appear some time during the coming year. Elsewhere I have dealt with certain of the differences in educational assumptions and procedures which characterized the two groups, sometimes constituting a bar to communication, to say nothing of understanding and agreement. I shall not repeat these matters here. I am more concerned with comparing the conclusions reached at Dartmouth with the issues raised in New York eight years ago, to see what can be gained by way of a perspective on our subject. Possibly the fact that Dartmouth arrived at conclusions rather than issues is significant in itself: eight years of fairly constant ferment have had their effect.

At certain points the reports are identical, or nearly so. There are the same concerns over teacher preparation, work load and teaching conditions, and the importance of educating the public about what is meant by good English and good English teaching. In a sense these are external problems and bid fair to continue to be with us for some years to come. We are making progress on some of them, but it is a long process and involves no change in point of view.

On three points, however, the conclusions of the Dartmouth Seminar do represent a change of focus, and I believe that these can be significantly related to the developments I have mentioned as occurring between the two meetings. First of all, especially with respect to literature, the content-centered approach of the Basic Issues Conference has been replaced by an emphasis upon experience and involvement. As Arthur Eastman has described it in a comment on the seminar, this amounts to, "a preference for power rather than knowledge, for experience rather than information, for engagement rather than criticism." In this connection it was interesting that the study-group report which everyone thought so excellent that it should be published separately was entitled, "Response to Literature." Related to this attitude toward literature was a similar sense of the urgency of developing classroom approaches stressing the vital, creative, and dramatic involvement of children and young people in language experiences—speaking and listening as well as reading and writing, interaction with each other as well as with the teacher.

How is all this to be interpreted? Did the Dartmouth Seminar reject the return to content of the post-Sputnik educational reformers only to go back again to the misinterpretations of John Dewey and the inanities of the experience curriculum? I think not. I believe that the title of the Commission on English report, *Freedom and Discipline*, or possibly even better *Engagement and Discipline*, characterizes the spirit of the Seminar and the drift of its conclusions. There was little or no question of the idea of English as a discipline. But the concept of discipline was operational rather than contentive. Almost immediately upon the opening of the conference the familiar question, "What is English?" was turned into, "What does the English teacher do?" which in effect was asking what the pupil or student might best be doing. All of this does imply that the sensitivity to literature and the adroitness in

the use of language that we seek cannot be achieved by pouring them into empty vessels, that they will come about only through engagement and exercise, and that the idea of exercise without engagement is fruitless. Certainly the concept of discipline is still there; it is the idea as to how it may be achieved that has changed.

One of the questions raised in the Basic Issues Conference concerned the extent to which a cumulative and sequential English program might be devised. The Dartmouth Seminar quite firmly rejected the idea of imposing a static and external curriculum on the schools solely in the interest of continuity. It felt that whatever is done along these lines must be in conformity with psychological, social, and linguistic patterns of growth, matters about which we know all too little and which merit further investigation. For the present, it was concluded, we must rely upon a day-to-day classroom method that nudges and encourages pupils as they take the initiative in organizing experience. "What we want," someone aptly put it, "is less specific than a curriculum and more than chaos. This means looking for continuity at more than one level of abstraction." Again I see this not as a rejection of an attitude implied in the Basic Issues Conference but rather as a refinement, a recognition that the problem is much more complex than it was originally understood to be, and that the solutions will remain with the individual school operating in a specific context rather than in an arbitrary list of grade level attainments.

I have already indicated that linguists were far more in evidence at the Dartmouth Seminar than at the earlier conference. As is frequently the case, their non-linguistic colleagues, with a few notable exceptions, had so little experience with the systematic study of language that communication was impaired. Nevertheless, they presented their case modestly, so quietly in fact that as someone commented, "It was easy to overlook how revolutionary they are." The statement goes on, "They have demonstrated unmistakably that popular ideas about 'Good English' are trivial and shallow when not false. There remains the unanswerable question of just when, what, and how much direct teaching of the structure of English there should be; but the agreement of the Seminar that English teachers need to have a sound, conscious knowledge of the language means that most teachers need to be retrained and the English curriculum drastically revised."

The Seminar was also notable for its unanimity of opposition to tracking (or "streaming") and to current practices in testing. These arose, in part at least, from an awareness that our educational systems function as instruments of polity, at times inimical to the continued development of a free and open society.

This probably summarizes as well as one can for the present the results of the international dialogue. I firmly believe that because the participation was international, the experience and indeed the quality of discussion was both broader and deeper than it would have been otherwise. Most of us Americans engaged in the English-teaching profession, though we may differ from one another in matters of detail, hold fairly firmly to certain basic assumptions about educational aims and procedures. We do have a mind-set determined by our culture; there is more that unifies than divides.

Consequently, the experience of discussing the many-faceted problems of teaching English with colleagues from abroad who not only refused to accept what so many of us had long taken for granted, but who quite clearly proceeded upon a wholly different set of premises, was salutary and refreshing as much as it was disturbing. It was this which lent a sense of excitement to our month-long proceedings and sent us home still pondering, still assessing, still probing. The larger context in which we were able to examine our professional problems gave all of us a perspective in which local and specific concerns might be gauged more accurately and a broader range of experience could be brought to bear on them. But we cannot afford to stop with talk. The next step is the extension of international cooperation from the discussion to the action level through collaborative research and cooperative engagement in various kinds of planning, development, and actual teaching in order that the most may be realized from this auspicious beginning. This time let us hope that we may swing into action without the delaying harassments of lack of manpower, lack of funds, and lack of interest.

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