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PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN A JUNIOR COLLEGE.

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BRIEF CHARACTER SKETCHES ARE GIVEN OF FIVE TYPES OF JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO DO NOT SEE THE VALUE OF ENGLISH COURSES AND THEREFORE ARE DIFFICULT TO TEACH. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH INSTRUCTION INCLUDE BETTER STUDENT MOTIVATION, ABILITY GROUPING, MORE EXPOSITORY WRITING, AND MORE INTENSIVE LITERATURE COURSES. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOLUME 52, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1964, PAGES 11-15. (BN)

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Problems in English Instruction in a Junior College

BY LYNNE BAKER

My purpose in speaking briefly to you is to acquaint you with some of the problems as I observed them in attending Wright Junior College. In spite of some of the illustrations I shall use today, I want you to know that I really enjoyed my experiences there. Those of you who are a part of junior college work are well acquainted with what I am going to say, but those of you on the University of Illinois faculty may be a little surprised.

During my stay at Wright Junior College in Chicago, I encountered many different types of students. Since the nature of these students and their academic purposes have a large bearing on the type of education one can attain at a junior college, I shall present several "case studies" of the students with whom I attended classes and knew. It was notable, for example, that for some enrolled students, education at Wright was a terminal, part-time affair; other students, I for one, regarded education at Wright as but the first stepping stone in an educational career, the all-important foundation upon which all future educational experiences would be based. Because of this multi-educational role the junior college must play, many difficulties arise, as I'm sure you are all aware. Allow me, then, to introduce my cast of characters—a cast of characters which appears daily in every junior college in the country.

Jim was a conscientious student, so long as his studying didn't interfere with his job in a local furniture store. He would come to school, listen attentively to the lecture being presented, dutifully copy down any assignments given, and promptly dash off to his job, which paid approximately \$1.75 an hour. Consequently, he was tired out after a long afternoon's work (sometimes he worked all evening also) and could barely glance over his assignments in the late evening hours. The next day, Jim would be right back in class, usually receiving a "C" or lower in his examination. Working was the prime concern of Jim's life; he was half-heartedly attending junior college, because he had heard that his salary could be increased with some college credits. Where was the teacher or counselor to inform Jim that he desperately needed the communication skills available to him in his freshman English course? Who was there to tell him that his salary would likely

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remain stationary for many years to come if he tried to star in two performances simultaneously; the one performance, his on-the-job impressions, so utterly dependent upon his secondary performance in his English class?

Cindy was an attractive platinum-blonde, with an extremely endowed figure. Whenever a dance or coffee hour was in the offing, Cindy would always be glad to lend a helping hand. Cindy's main educational concern was how to snare that cute, dark-haired, blue-eyed guy sitting in the next row. Always first with the latest dress fad or extreme hair-do, she would slither and wiggle sumptuously into class, conscious only of how many male heads would turn with her entrance. Her academic endeavors included occasional note-taking, an attentive but vapid facial expression which Cindy assumed looked academic (in actuality, she watched that cute guy next to her out of the corner of her left eye), and a rather frantic attempt to charm the professor after exam grades were announced. You might guess that Cindy did not graduate with honors . . . Cindy did not graduate. She is now happily married with two lovely children. We, as English teachers, are faced daily with Cindys. How can we interest them in the study of English? The answer is that we can't possibly interest Cindy in the thematic developments of Henry James; we must be content with interesting Cindy in reading and evaluating current periodicals; we must convince her that being a good mother involves being able to read and write effectively, so that when she runs for the presidency of the P.T.A. she will be able to write and deliver an effective speech.

Vic was the terror of the halls. He always had the latest joke at his disposal, knew all the facts about that '62 Corvette in the parking lot, and could learn any new dance-step with a few minutes of hasty instruction. How did this quick mind, so capable of remembering the intricacies of a butterfly-valve, so quickly disappear when he was sitting in a biology class? Although he could enumerate every part of a car engine, he would shudder with horror at the suggestion of analyzing a sentence. Vic was the football hero of high school, but somehow, somewhere, something had gone awry in college. No one knew that he had, almost single-handedly, beaten Taft in that crucial tournament game. Vic was but one of the many students, if I may so loosely apply the term, who still belonged in high school, who assumed no responsibilities, and who was in junior college to fool around and avoid work or the draft for another year. Interesting Vic in English poses quite a problem. Where is the English teacher who

can explain to Vic that English is our medium of communication, and that one must know how to speak and write effectively in order to avoid work or the draft?

Ernie honestly wanted to be a doctor; he had heard somewhere that a plush office, glamorous secretary, and \$20,000 a year were to be obtained by merely getting through a few simple courses in medical school. Ernie's parents were not wealthy; they could not afford sending him away to a university to live. So if he did well in junior college, he would earn the right to go on to a four-year university and perhaps on to medical school. Ernie had neither the ability nor the ambition to be a doctor; if there were an easy route to becoming a doctor, Ernie would try to find it. He would work for hours on elaborate schemes to avoid doing assignments instead of applying his time beneficially. Ernie is now happily working at a local gas station. Where was the junior college advisor to inform Ernie that he must make realistic plans for the future, that he must not set his sights on a goal far beyond his ability instead of leading him into an occupation for which his capabilities suited him? Furthermore, even a doctor with a \$20,000 a year salary must be able to communicate with his patients.

The last category of students found in junior college are the flunk-outs from other schools. The junior college performs an immense service to the community in that they take almost anyone and try to drum knowledge into an unwilling head. The flunk-outs are a unique group; they continually whine and find fault with the junior college, yet the junior college takes them off the streets when no other school will. This "open door policy," to quote Dr. Weingarten of Wright, produces the heterogeneous class, which I shall discuss shortly. They belittle the professors, belittle the courses, and belittle their fellow-students, always eager to announce that they will soon be "out of this dump and back at the fraternity house at good old Centerville U." This lack of a status symbol with which to identify is a problem of some consequence to the flunk-out who makes life difficult for the instructors and lowers the standards for the rest of the students. I don't honestly know if the advantages of applying one's self to serious study, in English or any other course, can be pointed out successfully to the flunk-out.

All of the students at junior college are not of this caliber; junior college is not a terminal education or a roosting perch for all of the students. I, for example, have gone on through four years of college work to obtain my B.A., and am now about to

receive my M.A. from the University of Illinois. I am not an example but an exception to the great number of students, and the junior college has an obligation to the academically minded as well as to the others, who I have tried to illuminate by case study.

The results of this heterogeneous mixture of students are somewhat discouraging. The instructors I had at Wright were learned people working under rather difficult conditions. They had to be challenging to the academically oriented and motivating to the others I have described. The problems to be faced in the efforts to motivate these students can be summarized briefly: overcoming unfavorable attitudes toward composition and literature; leading students to understand the practical value of proficiency in English and the relation of this to his chosen field; guiding the student to sustained and purposeful effort; imbuing the student with personal pride in his performance; urging care in preparing, proof-reading, and correcting papers; acquainting the unawakened student to what college work is; enlisting the student in the world of ideas and at the same time teaching him their mode of expression; overcoming his prejudice against English by giving him instruction in basic communication without repeating high school work. That is quite an ostentatious list of existing problems, the solution of which I am definitely not prepared to suggest. To recognize these problems, however, is an important first step toward their solutions.

Much of the headache and strain of the junior college teacher could be avoided with the utilization of ability grouping. This grouping would separate the academically minded and enable special attention and more effective teaching to result. I realize that administrative and staff limitations make this solution impossible in some cases, but every effort should be made eventually to carry such a program to completion.

Lower classroom achievement is a natural result of the existent situation; surface learning, with little or no intensive study, is inevitable. As a consequence, many students are ill-prepared for university study, where certain knowledge is assumed. Co-operation between the university and the junior college is desperately needed.

I must do much writing and intensive library research in graduate school; I do not feel that my freshman level English courses prepared me for graduate work. All semester in one English course was devoted to writing a series of ten short papers, totally devoted to direct observation reporting. I would

have to sit down in the cafeteria, for example, and intensively observe a student eating, noting every physical movement. Then I would have to put down accurately on paper this profound observation . . . this was supposedly an exercise in literary accuracy. I needed more drill on writing expository papers to help me in my university work. Perhaps this exercise was beneficial to some, but not to me . . . ability grouping could have rectified this almost intolerable situation. I would suggest that the students be taught clear, effective use of language with more frequent writing on meaningful topics requiring critical thinking. The literature courses should require more intensive study, with emphasis on close reading and analysis. There should be concentration on more difficult works; I believe that *Great Expectations* was the only novel I read in junior college. There might be more emphasis on literature in general in the required rhetoric courses.

In spite of all my former observations, I am *glad* I attended Wright Junior College; the convenience of living at home and the money I saved as a result were advantages that cannot be denied. I had a good social life at Wright, seeking out memberships in the Student Senate and various clubs. I worked in order to get my "A's" but I did not work up to my capacity, as I have now discovered in graduate school.

Many people far wiser and more learned than I have tried to resolve these problems I have attempted to enumerate . . . I do not pretend to know the answers now or in the near future. I, myself, will probably be teaching in junior college this September in California; I can only try to prepare my students as I would have desired to be prepared. This attempt of mine will involve an endeavor to change the frame of mind of the average junior college student. His concern with outside activities and his high school attitudes should be changed into good work habits, seriousness of purpose, and the ability to adjust to an academic atmosphere. I shall attempt to change mere toleration of required English courses into genuine enjoyment of literature and composition, through meaningful assignments, novels in which the students are interested, allowing them plenty of leeway when selecting at least one intensive study per semester.

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