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SIX IDEAS IN SEARCH OF SUPERVISORS OF ENGLISH.

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AS ENGLISH SUPERVISORS SEEK TO IMPROVE THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH, THEY SHOULD CONSIDER THAT DEVELOPMENTS IN OTHER SCHOOLS DO NOT ALWAYS SUIT LOCAL CONDITIONS AND THAT PRESENT CHANGE IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH ALLOWS TEACHERS TO EXPERIMENT FREELY IN THEIR CLASSROOMS. IN LIGHT OF THIS FREEDOM TO INNOVATE, SUPERVISORS MAY FIND THE FOLLOWING SIX IDEAS HELPFUL--(1) ARRANGING A TEACHER-EXCHANGE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE TO PROMOTE MORE EFFECTIVE ARTICULATION BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS; (2) ENCOURAGING TEACHERS TO COOPERATE WITH THEIR STUDENTS IN CREATING--POSSIBLY ORALLY TO BEGIN WITH--THEIR OWN COMPOSITION TEXTS FOR EACH CLASS; (3) INTRODUCING THE FORMATION OF STUDY GROUPS COMPOSED OF TEACHERS WHO MEET REGULARLY TO DISCUSS DEVELOPMENTS IN THEIR OWN CLASSROOMS; (4) ENCOURAGING THESE TEACHER-DISCUSSION GROUPS TO STUDY LINGUISTICS AND GRADUALLY ASSEMBLE THEIR OWN LINGUISTIC TEXTS; (5) REPLACING THE CLASSICAL LITERATURE CURRICULUM WITH SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT IN TERMS OF WHAT BOTH THE STUDENT AND THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH RECOGNIZE AS LITERATURE; AND (6) DEVELOPING, ALONG WITH THE TEACHERS, A PERSONAL THEORY OF LITERATURE TO HELP ASSURE THE VALID SELECTION OF LITERARY WORKS FOR STUDENTS. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "VIRGINIA ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOL. 17 (DECEMBER 1967), 2-8.) (MM)

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SIX IDEAS IN SEARCH OF SUPERVISORS OF ENGLISH

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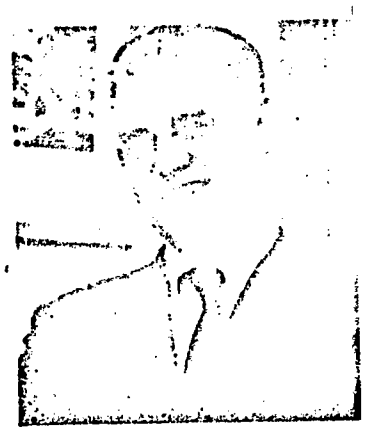
The teacher's old stamping-ground—the classroom—together we can turn into a new frontier in the teaching of English by letting the voice of the student be heard over the voice of the teacher.

Every teacher supervisor and department head knows one simple remedy for improving the English teaching and curriculum in his school system: halve the number of students, treble the staff and double their pay.



Mr. Robertson

Mr. Robertson was the key note speaker at VATE's third Annual Supervisory Conference last November.

More realistically, you can examine carefully all the new material on English teaching and the English curriculum, select that relevant to your system, retain your teachers, and await the no doubt startling results. That course of action is as impossible as the first. No one can keep abreast of the developments flooding in from all over the country. English is on the move and we teachers are caught up in that flux, but before we throw up our hands in despair at ever grasping what is going on all over the country there are two points we should consider.

In the first place, developments elsewhere do not always suit local conditions; some of these developments depend essentially on retooling the teacher through in-service courses, sabbatical leaves, or special institutes, and few of you have enough leeway in your budgets to afford that retooling. Secondly, the fact of flux is more important than its nature: if English is on the move we are more free to experiment in our classrooms and to turn our English departments into little curriculum centers, quite possibly duplicating work done elsewhere but acknowledging one of our most precious assets—the fund of good ideas many an English teacher has been unable to play with because of either curriculum restrictions or tiresome conditions. There is no royal road to experience in teaching, as Piaget reminds us when he mocks what he calls "the American question": Can't we somehow accelerate development? The English teachers you supervise or direct have the experience no course or Institute or training can give them, and they are the only English teachers you have. My remarks, therefore, are intended to recognize the pragmatics of our local situation, and, since I am not a supervisor or department head, but simply a teacher, they may sound rather irresponsible.

I invite you to regard me first as an example of the majority of college teachers of English, as one of those people to whom you send your products but who know little of your situation or processes. Because, however, the Department of English of which I am a member is now trying, among its other related developments, to gear its work and particularly its graduate students, its product, to your schools, we are in a state of transition; our state of transition is similar to what you are facing in your schools and school system. We have a

Editor's Note: Mr. Robertson is director of the NDEA Institute at VPI and chairman of the NCTE's Commission on World Literature

great deal in common and we should capitalize on that situation.

I take the liberty of describing myself not only as an average member of the V.P.I. Department of English and indeed of most college English Departments at state universities in this country, but also as an average English teacher; I do not think (after the NDEA Institute) that I am very different from your teachers. I am trained and interested more in literature than in language and I have not been taught how to teach composition, which nevertheless does not save me from having to do it. Secondly, I have an ingrained suspicion of education courses and of professional educators, probably the result of my training and possibly my most serious defect in completing the transition I referred to. Thirdly, like all of us I am very busy each quarter with 122 students in four courses, each requiring on an average 3000 words of writing from each student each quarter, or a total of one million words to grade between September and June every year. Fourthly, I am well aware that tremendous changes are occurring in the discipline and teaching of English at the national level and that these are now percolating down to us locals—here a new textbook, there an Institute, elsewhere a conference.

I. *College-School Teacher Exchange*

What can be done with this English teacher in the upgrading of the English curriculum? It is obvious that his training is at odds with his job, or that he is in the wrong job. The work he is best prepared for is reproducing his own kind; training graduate students in English/American literature who will become college teachers of literature. And how many of the students you are responsible for in the schools are likely to fill that slot?

The first task of a supervisor or a department head at a school would seem to be correcting an imbalance or bias at the college level; since the bias lasts longer there and is more firmly fixed the college teachers' sectional affiliation with you in NCTE and VATE presents you with an opportunity for evangelism of a particularly difficult and delicate nature. It does not seem to me that you can avoid that opportunity and challenge as your first way of upgrading the English curriculum in your schools.

The reasons for suggesting first an outward rather than an inward move are two: in the first place, the tempo of the school English curriculum is largely determined by the college-bound students, and that proportion in any school increases yearly. If the college curriculum can be significantly altered so that an essentially sequential curriculum (grades K through 16) is established then you know much more clearly where the province of the school curriculum lies, and I am not talking about a curriculum determined only by context.

In the second place, the college curriculum as it stands is slowly moving down into the schools; the clearest example of this in English is linguistics, but there is plenty of evidence that the elementary critical methods taught in a freshman college English course have been learned in from one to as many as three years of high school English—depending, of course, on the caliber of the teacher, the school *and* the supervisor. At V.P.I. we have this year begun a new freshman English course, "Types of Discourse and Literature," which is a far cry from the composition courses formerly taught for almost three solid quarters.

This downward movement of the curriculum will continue in English as it is doing in other disciplines; the vacuum at the top in the 15th and 16th grades is filled, of course, from what is presently done in the 17th-20th grades, meaning an increase in research and synthesis. Thus the total situation as it affects the schools is that of a moving curriculum becoming increasingly dominant as the proportion of college-bound students increases.

What has already happened is that colleges are demanding literacy as a prerequisite for entrance, meaning the exit of composition courses at college

and the whole burden of literacy being placed on the schools, where, I cheerfully assert, it belongs. This is, of course, being too cheerful by far, especially when each of you calls to mind, as I am sure you can, appalling illiteracy in senior high school students.

The most effective way of ensuring that both the supervisor and his teachers know what is happening at the college level is to arrange teacher-exchange between school and college. I admit the organization and authorization of this exchange would be difficult but before dismissing the idea you should think of its benefits, not only to your teachers, but also to the college teacher and ultimately to your own graduates. We can talk about articulating the two systems of teaching English but until each understands the other's problems we will not turn talk into action. College teachers don't mind visiting your senior classes; have they ever been invited to teach a whole semester? And would they accept if they were? Some sort of funded proposal is probably necessary to ensure that college teachers really know what they are talking about when they criticize the high school curriculum, and that high school teachers are not relying on rumor or their own distant memories when they try to prepare their seniors for college. If graduate assistants can be entrusted with teaching freshman composition I fail to see how veteran English teachers could not help do a better job.

My suggestion that Virginia supervisors should explore such a scheme stems from acquaintance with the splendid English teachers in our NDEA Institute. I felt perfectly confident that they could teach not only my children but also my students.

Cooperative Composition

We do not need Marshall McLuhan to tell us, though apparently we do need him to remind us, that literacy is a necessary peculiarity in our civilization. If I restrict myself only to the English-speaking nations of the globe, the American was until recently similar to the African or Indian nations where English is an official second language. At universities in those countries compulsory English composition is taught at the college level; in the Dominions and Great Britain literacy is taken for granted at college. The late shift of composition from college to school in this country seems to me to have been caused by a number of factors: This country is the only one of the English-speaking nations where most of its citizens have been taught their language at school by women; the strong frontier distinction between women's work and men's work seems to have affected the national attitude to the national language—literacy is women's work, oracy is men's work. We should, therefore, be thinking of both kinds of composition, encouraging equal competence in each, setting for our goal simply that each student should write as well as he speaks and speak as well as he writes, and continually improve both faculties.

But our problem teacher is not trained at college to teach composition as writing and has less acquaintance with speaking. What can be done with him, especially since he is suspicious of methods of teaching written and oral composition? We remember that he is supposed to be trained in literature. Here I come to a very personal and probably heretical belief which I think, on the basis of my experience at V.P.I., could solve the problem: I believe that neither written nor oral composition (or expression) can be taught directly; I believe that both rub off indirectly on the student—indirectly and more effectively. Taught composition has all the artificiality of the manners of a young lady who has just graduated *summa cum laude* from the local charm school; it tastes of plastic; there is no human personality behind it. If one cannot teach composition but one believes that, like good manners, it can be learned so that it is unobtrusive—simply a vehicle for the expression of the personality as good clothes are not what one notices but what one remembers of the well-dressed man—how then does

one provide the right learning environment?

The English teacher must speak better and write better than anyone else in the school, and the supervisor and department head speaks and writes better than his teachers.

This demand is professionally and ethically inescapable, and is commonly acknowledged by the general public and by our colleagues when they ask us to solve a knotty problem of style or mechanics. I don't think such professional superiority can be taught directly. One hopes the teacher acquired it during school and college and has improved it since, though the attrition in one's verbal skills when working for years with dull students can be severe. But we can lose these skills in other ways, and so can our students. It is our suspicion at V.P.I. that reasonably competent freshman writers often lose their skill by the time they come to write their master's thesis—in some subject other than English, of course. But that's also what happens to the charm school graduate plunged into the messiness of motherhood.

Three activities help us hold our skills: eternal curiosity about books and speech; growing self-awareness of our own speech and writing habits; and a genuine *love* for the activity of writing and speaking.

My second idea, therefore, for the supervisor in search of ideas concerns the teaching of composition. I suggest that the kind of teacher we are positing knows that speaking is as important as writing, and can do both well. The teacher, then, should write along with his students. What about throwing away all English textbooks that teach composition? The composition text for each class would then be written by the teacher and students—models, analyses, questions, exercises and rules—so that it is completely assembled only at the end of the course, and is not just another "darn, fat, thick, square book" to be worried with during the year. If one learns to write by writing, why not write something that you can be proud to show to parents, colleagues, department heads and supervisors? The composition text can just as well come out of the classroom as come into it.

To advance the idea further I suggest that composing or creating the text should be done not only cooperatively but also orally to begin with. I admit that great care must be taken to see that the student who can already read, write and speak with facility neither starves during the composing nor dominates the whole process. You can prevent the first by giving him the run of the library—the school's or your own; this will help the indirect improvement of writing by acquaintance with good writers that I think is ultimately how we learn to write. Contrariwise, I don't think rubbing the noses of students in great prose before they can really see its greatness does anything but encourage cant about the prose style of, say, Macaulay.

This verbally facile student will also be restrained from cant and from dominating the class—the second danger in this cooperative undertaking—by giving an opportunity to the less obviously college-bound student to speak up in the oral discussions that I suggest you begin with. I am sure we all know terminal high school students with superior resources of wit, experience and thoughtfulness who speak better than they write. This is their opportunity (for once) to show their abilities and to improve one faculty by exercising the other.

These suggestions about learning rather than teaching composition have come from courses at Virginia Polytechnic Institute—at least from those I teach, and they are based on the premise that composition means the composing and testing of one's thoughts before expressing them in writing. If Socrates could teach the salve boy inductively the theorem of the square of the hypotenuse, we can teach our students to find the ideas within them, then to explore those ideas that interest them (and our own are always more fascinating than another's),

then by thinking aloud to find the words in which to compose their thoughts; after that comes the relatively simple matter of putting them down on paper. This in itself is the process by which much of our literature has been written; we have plenty of records of poets composing a poem in their heads over a long period of time.

Some examples of what is happening in some English classes at V.P.I. may reassure you that it can be done; you will have to take my word that it can also be tested if you do not have the courage of your convictions about a student's progress. An honors section of freshman English voted in class on a text to illustrate the organizing of diverse material into one book; each nomination was moved and seconded by the pair proposing the text for adoption; the voting figures for first and second preference were recorded on the board (by a student) and the first piece of writing in the class was analyzing the voting figures in a short paragraph of exposition. (The text adopted was Ardrey's *African Genesis.*)

In a regular freshman composition class, first quarter, the first exercise was to stand up and describe one's senior high school English course. From the students' notes of each speaker we wrote a class theme on the blackboard, voting it in sentence by sentence for several days until we had a version agreeable to all. The title, of course, we wrote last; "Core and Variations in High School Senior English Courses." A class in Advanced Expository Writing prepared a questionnaire on the motives of fifteen members in registering for the course; the results were tabulated on the blackboard and the first writing exercise was to translate the statistics into an acceptable paragraph. The teacher's place in the classroom during most of these activities was at the back of the room.

Teacher Discussion Groups

Although we regularly use the study-group method in our national and local organizations and meetings, we rarely make these permanent. I suggest that supervisors and department heads should encourage the formation of groups meeting regularly not to discuss material circulated from the administrator nor to exult in and display the verbal felicity I suggested above that all English teachers possess. Rather they should talk over what is happening in their classrooms. This follows the course of discussion at the Dartmouth Seminar where the basic question "What is English" was answered: "English is whatever the English student is *doing* in the English classroom." This third idea follows from the second: if teachers are cooperatively creating a composition text they will have plenty to tell each other in their meetings.

The idea of such groups is also in accord with the notion of the "consensus" expressed in *Freedom and Discipline in English* (pp 42 ff.)

I am sure that we have all had similar ideas for years. I have been able to develop mine because of the freedom and discipline of the Department of English at V.P.I., which has instituted an "English Colloquy," a fortnightly meeting of staff to discuss developments in our discipline. Through the Colloquy and other innovations in my department, reserves of ideas and (surprisingly) of energy have been tapped in ways that do not detract from the teaching of the department, but improve it.

Training in Linguistics

One of the more obvious improvements our typical English teacher needs is training in linguistics. I suggest that could also be done in the English teacher discussion groups as a form of mutual self-help, for I am sure that I am not alone in acknowledging my need for such training. The department head and the supervisor can help, but the real responsibility is the teacher's and my best help, I think, could come from my colleagues. Each department or discussion group could gradually assemble its own text on linguistics. Graduate students have used these "beefing-up" sessions for years;

James D. Hart, compiler of the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, tells a good story about taking part as a Ph.D. candidate in such mutual quiz sessions; the group so bewailed the fact that no one had written a ready-reference text on American lierature that Hart was prompted to compile the *Companion*.

The need for linguistic training is stressed in the report given to the College Section of NCTE by the NCTE President, Dr. Marckwardt, last December in New York on three main points of the Dartmouth Seminar: ". . . 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." (*PMLA*, Sept., 1967, p. 13). The need is further emphasized in the *Teacher Preparation Guidelines* and these requirements will begin to press on us all as they become standards for certification and certificate renewal; in turn they will alter the curriculum of the college departments of English if they are interested in preparing teachers of English. Thus the "new English" is not something that affects only the schools, and we can be sure that it will also change the teaching of literature and thus the standard or classic curriculum which has served us more or less since the introduction of compulsory education.

The Classic Curriculum

Our average English teacher is supposed to be trained to teach literature, but it is becoming apparent that he may not have been trained in literature as such—he may have been taught Shakespeare, Pope, Melville, and Faulkner, but never have put them together to spell literature. The classical curriculum of selections from great English and American writers has been broken forever. Never more will we be able to state that all English literature begins with *Beowulf* unless we can show that this is a meaningful statement which the student can validate to his own satisfaction, and significant in more than an historical sense. This suggests the awful possibility that your students may leave high school never having read Shakespeare in class, that is. That would be their loss unless something significant is put in its place, significant in terms of what the students can recognize as literature, which may even be his own poems, and what the discipline of English recognizes as literature. This is a fearful critical responsibility to place on the English teacher, but it prevents him from mouthing statements echoed from the anthology introductions and repeated again in the quizzes and term papers, sometimes loftily labelled research. Research should mean the student's searching his own mind for a response to literature and explicating that response.

No response, no explication. Try another word. We know in our own minds that this is the only honest way of teaching literature even if we have to drop Shakespeare and go all the way down to "Roses are red, violets blue" before we get a response. Teachers who have seen the Hunter-Gateway materials produced by Marjorie Smiley may have been shocked at the use of lyrics from *West Side Story* instead of passages from *Romeo and Juliet*, and they may well raise the specter of a new generation unacquainted with the common literary heritage of the English-speaking nations, lacking all reference to English classics and hence unable to make decent literary judgments, thus compounding the new illiteracy that already threatens us if the linguists finally convince us we can accept "It is me" in our classrooms.

The answer is that the English student must be allowed to validate and believe in his literary judgment for it to be worth anything to him in the fifty years ahead of him as a mature adult. If that does not convince that kind of teacher—and it is his professional conscience that is at stake—then this personal but honest opinion derived from some years in the classroom and shared, I believe, by many teachers in their hearts can be supported again by Dr. Marckwardt in the article previously referred

. . . has been replaced by an emphasis to: ". . . the content-centered approach on experience and involvement . . . 'a preference for power rather than knowledge, for experience rather than information, for engagement rather than criticism' . . . 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, inter-action with each other as well as with the teacher." This amounts to saying that what the English student is doing in the English classroom is developing a faculty he brings to the classroom—his mother-tongue—so as to read writing that means something to him and to write something that is worth reading.

A Personal Theory of Literature

Improving the English curriculum depends on improving the English teacher by techniques of local self-help; the job of the supervisor is to allow and encourage that self-help to take place and to improve his own skills. If the classic curriculum of literature in which the English teacher has been trained is to break up and a skill in reading literature is to take its place, what does that skill depend on? Certainly on a wide acquaintance with literature in English—not just English and American literature but also that of the two hundred million native speakers of the tongue in all parts of the world. Since the literature is enormous the teacher will select according to his trained preferences—more simply, his taste. Just as we must be the best speakers and writers of English, so we should be the best readers. In order to justify your taste we need a personal theory or definition of literature, a theory of what that activity of the human mind is that we call literature, and how it affects us all. We cannot make right decisions in daily life unless we have a belief or philosophy of life which instinctively guides our decisions and which we can explicate when we are in a tight corner —when, for example, a loved one dies and we try to understand why. Similarly we cannot make valid momentary decisions in the daily classroom discussions of literature unless we know what at bottom we think literature is.

We can learn our own theory of literature by watching our reactions to what we read, but also from or students' reactions. This is roughly what happened in the NDEA Institute in Advanced Literary Studies at VPI: staff and participants, experienced teachers both, stimulated each other to clarify judgments of more and more complex points in analysing literature. The teaching of literary taste in the classroom should be done inductively and cooperatively, like the creation of composition. And since the process of defining literature to your satisfaction is infinite, the only satisfaction comes from the improvement in the skill of making and sustaining judgments.

No participant left us with a complete theory of literature, but we all began thinking more seriously about literature and this must increase our statu.e and development as English teachers. Your own personal theory of literature is the root of this development; it is a growth in literary works and in their contemthat depends on how much you feed it plation. My final suggestion then, is that we all, teachers and supervisors, begin thinking more about that large abstract term at the core of our discipline, knowing we will never learn the answer but aware that trying to do so will keep us alive as English teachers and provide the only sure refuge against a tedious retirement—an active mind.

I am suggesting, to summarize all six suggestions, that the English student is acquiring a skill, and that acquisition can be based as it is for us on love of our subject. Skill breeds love as the skillful driver loves his car. I propose a love affair between the young citizen and his national language, his literature, his English—and, goodness knows, that would alter the attitude to the subject of English that so many of our past students seem to have.