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In this description of two antithetical opinions concerning freshman English program objectives, cases are presented for the language skills improvement and literature appreciation points of view. Such factors as (1) class size, (2) instructor work load and research potential, and (3) student and teacher interests are considered. A discussion of the Russell Sage compromise program consisting of one semester of composition and research and another, of Western literature reading concludes the article. (AF)

Discipline Versus the "Viewless Wings of Poesy"

VIRGINIA L. RADLEY

A freshman English program designed to reconcile the competing claims of literacy and literature

Samuel Taylor Coleridge early recognized the importance of what he termed "the principle of the reconciliation of opposites." [1] This principle held that pairs of opposites must be reconciled in a different third if progress in thought were to take place.

In a sense, the dilemma faced by college English departments is one brought about by the existence of two seemingly antithetical goals: service and inspiration. These apparent opposites permeate and unsettle almost every course in the English curriculum and, further, almost all instructors' thinking about these courses. Nowhere, however, is a reconciliation of the two goals more urgent than in curricular planning for freshman English.

How many chairmen have found themselves confronted in departmental meetings with two points of view, each in its own way valid, each seeming diametrically opposed to the other; the one addressed through discipline to the goal of service, the other through inspiration to the goal of appreciation.

For example, in the first hypothetical situation, Instructor Smith expounds the ideal curriculum for freshman English as follows:

> Entering students don't know the first thing about the fundamentals of English grammar. Not only do they fail to follow the rudiments of clear exposition, but worse, they can't read with any degree of comprehension. I don't know what they have been doing for four years in high school, but whatever they did, it had nothing to do with English as we conceive it. I therefore believe that it falls to us to teach them to read and write before we

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try to raise them on the "viewless wings of poesy." For these reasons, I favor a rigorous course in logic and rhetoric, with a minimal requirement of one composition per week, corrections to be based upon some standard handbook "scheme," adequate provision for student-instructor conferences, mandatory rewriting—in short the whole matter reduced to a disciplinary attack which will force these poorly prepared students to come out of freshman English with at least the minimal requirements of sound thought and lucid expression in hand.

The second point of view is immediately presented by Instructor Brown in the following retaliatory and equally fervent remarks:

That is all very well and good, Dr Smith, and I think no one here would dispute that entering students need more skills than they seem to bring to college. But I for one did not take advanced study and receive the Ph.D. degree in order to spend the bulk of my time teaching the use of the comma. You, in fact, are not talking about a *college* English program: you are addressing your remarks to the junior high school level. I do not see why we should serve as a mop-up committee. Not only do I fail to see why this falls to us, but also I believe in the old adage that "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." In my opinion, what these entering students need is an introduction to the "best that has been known and thought," to the end that they may become inspired enough to think deeply enough to have something worthwhile to say. I know that there are others who will agree with me when I say that I am not interested in reading flawless compositions on "My Pet" or "My Summer Vacation," and I am afraid, Smith, that if we devote our time to teaching rudiments we won't have time to inspire students to develop past these topics. I therefore favor some kind of introduction to literature, and to good literature at that. In this way, students are fed, so to speak, that nectar and ambrosia so essential to inspired thinking and writing.

Not only are both Smith and Brown right (though both have of course oversimplified the seat of the blame by citing the high schools when the fault seems rather to lie within the very warp and woof of contemporary society), but also both project points of view indicative in general of the two major attitudes of college English teachers. The job of the chairman, having heard both men out, is to start sorting the problems and virtues belonging to each.

First, in the case of Smith, there is the enormous burden which his proposal imposes, not only upon students (for that is good), but also upon each instructor. Most instructors have had no training in the teaching of writing since their own first-year college composition course. The Ph.D. dissertation with its emphasis upon scholarly research can scarcely be said to equip a man to teach freshman composition. In addition to this lack of training, there is the tremendous paper

load itself. Assuming that each instructor carries two sections of 25 each, the paper load will be fifty per week initially and, with Smith's handbook correction scheme which calls for student-correction and rewriting, this load will double to one hundred papers per week. Some reader may suggest that the number in each section be reduced but, as any chairman knows, 25 per section, while scarcely ideal, is at least realistic in terms of the numbers of students who are in, and will be coming into, college.

To complete the twelve-hour load, the instructor has usually been assigned two advanced courses. While these do not carry the heavy paper load of freshman English, as proposed by Smith, they do require meticulous preparation. These courses plus the freshman sections have rather dire implications for the department as a whole. After all, in this research-minded age, the chairman hopes the department will be productive in a scholarly way. If Smith's scheme is to continue throughout the entire year, it seems that no scholarly research of any significance can be forthcoming.

Another reader may interject at this point: "Why not hire people to take a full twelve-hour load in freshman composition?" And the answer again is, as almost all chairmen know: "You cannot interest even the remarkable Dr Smith in a twelve-hour composition load; and even if you could, there simply are not enough minutes in a week to handle 200 papers in the meticulous manner in which Smith wishes them to be corrected."

The chairman knows, however, having read Professor Kitzhaber's report with its recommendations for the teaching of freshman English, that no composition program of value can ignore the hypothetical Smith's recommendations.[2] Apparently, Smith's is the one plan that is known to improve student writing, at least during the time the scheme is in effect.

In summary, Smith's proposal means for a college of 1000 and an English staff of seven or eight that each instructor will have two sections of freshman composition and no time for scholarly research. In addition, the administration will find itself supporting one of the most expensive programs in the college curriculum. Finally, students will undoubtedly learn to read and write better than they did upon entrance *if* Dr Brown and those adhering to his point of view can overcome their resentment at having to teach the use of the comma in lieu of Satanic overtones in *Paradise Lost.*

The chairman now turns to consideration of Dr Brown's "inspirational" proposal. Here class size may be permitted to jump from 25 to

35. There cannot be as many papers. After all, the preparation of Canto I of the *Divine Comedy* or of Book I of *Paradise Lost* takes a great deal more time than the preparation of one of the many short essays in any standard collection utilized in Smith's plan. Class size may not be permitted to double, however, for under Brown's plan the students have not been disciplined to read in depth. Therefore much of class time must be devoted to the discovery of nuance and meaning in the great books under study. Under Brown's plan, students seem to like freshman English, even though they do seem to want to use masterpieces as springboards to a discussion of their own problems rather than to study these masterpieces as works of art in and of themselves. Certainly the department leans toward Brown's proposal. After all, were they not trained to teach *belles lettres* rather than baby grammar?

But then the chairman has as part of his job the obligation of seeing the broader aspects of the curriculum; that is, how does the program in freshman English relate to other departments and to the college as a whole? The total faculty has legislated that all entering students must take one year (six credits) of freshman English. What does the total faculty wish the product to be?

The chairman remembers having been approached on numerous occasions in the past by other faculty members who seemed upset about the products emerging from Brown-oriented freshman English programs. He recalls the gist of their comments:

> What are you *doing* in first-year English? My majors cannot write a sentence correctly, to say nothing of a seminar paper. If you people in English can't do a better job, I don't see how you can justify a requirement in first-year English either to the administration or to your colleagues in other departments. Why, we might as well require that all students take a year of Sanskrit, or something equally bizarre, for all they seem to have learned after a year with you people.

Faced with two valid points of view, which differ in both intent and object, the chairman and the department know that some kind of decision has to be made. Inasmuch as both points of view and both programs are essential to the student's education, the wise department will seek some kind of reconciliation. Obviously, the student must know how to read and write and must also have some notion that literature, like life, is a repository of human experience, both inspirational and on occasion disillusioning; that an encounter with the "best that has been known and thought" should be of inestimable joy to him not only now but also in future years. A knowledge of reading and writing

and an appreciation of literature constitute in part the hallmark of the educated man and woman.

In an attempt to impart this hallmark to each entering student, the English department at Russell Sage College has tried to reconcile the two points of view. It has done so in recognition of the essentiality of each to the beginning student and in recognition also of the needs of individual department members to engage in scholarly research. To these ends the freshman English program is directed. While undoubtedly not unique, the program, now in its third year of operation, appears to be successful.

In the first semester of the freshman year, the department devotes its efforts to the teaching of composition and research. For the first six weeks, each freshman writes at least one composition per week and, in general, follows the scheme proposed by the hypothetical Smith. In the last eight weeks, the student is introduced to research in both primary and secondary source materials. Department members quite cheerfully accept this heavy paper load because not only do students obviously improve in their knowledge and use of fundamentals over the fourteen weeks, but also faculty members can look forward to a change of program in the second semester, a change that allows individual members more time for their own research and one that provides students with the incentive to acquire those skills requisite to entering the second semester course.

In the second semester, students are introduced to the "best that has been known and thought." That is, they are introduced to representative samples of the heritage of the Western world. Beginning with Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* students move from the classical period to the medieval period, through the romance of *Tristan and Iseult,* and Dante's *Divine Comedy,* up to the Renaissance, where they encounter Shakespeare's sonnets and one of his early plays; then on into the eighteenth century with Voltaire's *Candide,* and finally into the nineteenth century, represented by Goethe's *Faust.* Roughly chronological, the course is representative of both major periods and diverse countries: Greece, Italy, England, France, Germany. Content may change from year to year, but always the widest cultural representation is sought. The range stops with the Western world only because of the limitations of the department with respect to Eastern literature.

In addition to wrestling with problems which have confronted mankind throughout the ages, students gain some notion of the difference in point of view from the writers of antiquity through comparatively

modern times—indeed often finding that, though the periods may differ, the major problems of mankind are wont to remain the same and the central truths tend to reiterate themselves.

Obviously, in order that students can handle this high-powered literature with affectiveness, rigorous standards must have been maintained throughout the first-semester composition course. Proficiency in reading and writing and in use of the library resources is essential to a successful experience in the second semester. Although the second semester does not require a prescribed minimum of papers, students write short papers of a critical nature which have grown out of their absorption with the content of the masterpieses. Examinations of both an essay and objective nature are of course required.

Both instructors and students seem to prefer this curriculum to one that is either all composition or all introduction to literature. Certainly a great many faculty members outside the department are more agreeable to such a split. As for concrete results, there are more failures in the first semester than in the second. The reasons are quite clear: students have to discipline themselves in the first semester to acquire the skills requisite to successful reading and writing. Those who fail to achieve these minimal skills are not permitted to enter the second semester but must repeat the first. This means that those students who do enter the second-semester course may proceed more quickly and more profoundly in their study of literature. Instructors themselves appear to have more time for their own research, witness the fact that six books in a department of eight are currently under contract for publication.

There will always be English departments who are more "Smith" than "Brown" and vice versa, but the reconciliation attempted at Russell Sage College is apt to make them less rabidly either and, in addition, to produce students who have the satisfaction of being literate sojourners on those "viewless wings of poesy."

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1 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* – ed. J. Shawcross, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1907, I, pp. 197-198

2 Albert Kitzhaber, *Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1963