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By-Fader, Daniel
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Perspective on how English professors and English departments can engage professionally and meaningfully in the education of impoverished children is provided through the recounting of a number of experiences in related situations. A discussion with a college literature class about how best to recruit and instruct college-level black students precedes a description of experiences dealing with children in a nursery school group in which one member was a brain-damaged child. The concluding portion examines (1) teacher self-examination to improve the quantity and quality of literacy instruction, (2) visits to all types and levels of schools to determine best instructional practices, and (3) listening to students and teachers to effect attitude changes, as the best procedures for selecting an effective English curriculum for a boys' reform school. (AF)

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ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS AND POVERTY*

by Daniel Fader, KMS Industries, Inc.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have invited me to speak to the question of what professional role you as chairmen, your departments, and your institutions can play in our national war against poverty. I will try to answer that question in the next thirty minutes; I want to begin, however, with a cautionary tale which is meant to give you both pause and perspective when you consider my answer:

On the Monday after Martin Luther King's assassination--the day before his funeral--I met my Shakespeare class at the University of Michigan. The Tempest was our scheduled topic, but to talk about the maturity of reconciliation while Mr. King awaited burial was a greater act of faith than I was capable of performing. Instead, I offered my hundred students the opportunity their spokesmen (or, at least, their peers) publicly demanded: Participation. I invited them to participate in searching for solutions to the University's dilemma--its relationship to American poverty. Specifically, what could it do to help the black man in Detroit's urban ghetto? Detroit may not be the world, or even like it, I said, but it's where we are, and it's where we can begin.

Silence. Interested eyes and expectant faces. But silence nevertheless.

All right, I said, the weekend has been shattering for all of us and my invitation comes unexpectedly. Let me describe the solution I propose, and then you can give me--and the university--the benefit of your advice; but first, I want to put the problem in a special context:

You must be aware that our best colleges and universities are engaged in the frantic pursuit of promising black bodies. This pursuit is understood by both races as a kind of ocular necessity, and few men of any color believe it to be useful or important in itself. Perhaps it is only significant as a symbol of the black dementia which now afflicts the liberal intellect, a compensatory insanity which has overtaken white colleges and universities like our own.

That madness takes the form of accumulating black students and professors, no matter what the expense. I am not thinking of money when I speak of expense; instead, I think of cost reckoned in terms of individual lives and institutional morality. I am thinking, for instance, of the black students at this University, a group composed partially of black athletes alien to the white student-faculty community, a group giving far more than it gets because we must have them in order to be acceptable to ourselves while they do not need us in order to be cozened out of an education. Any number of other schools will cozen them as well.

And who are the other black students? In one important respect they are just like their white counterparts--they have been greatly successful before, and they will be again. Success is their habit; they expect it, recognize it, and attain it. The white student-faculty welcomes them because they are "just like us" in the most important meaning of that phrase for a performance-oriented society. We have recruited them at least as avidly as we have recruited black

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*A speech to ADE at NCTE in 1968.

athletes, and we assuage our conscience on an annual basis by counting them all. As their number grows, we find our self-prognosis improving and our disease in remission. There can be little doubt of the remedy: Black bodies, taken in cautious but increasing amounts, make white campuses feel better.

When I speak of expense, I am also thinking of the rape of black colleges and universities being performed in the name of recruiting black faculty to white institutions. We do not, of course, propose also to take the black students their best professors leave behind. But we do need the professors; and, as always, our needs come first. Reckoned in terms of moral responsibility and institutional humanity, the recruitment of black faculty by white institutions may be the costliest aspect of our insanity.

For the moment, however, let us avoid the problem of increasing black faculty at white colleges and confront the problem of bringing black students into the University of Michigan. Presently, all or almost all of the black students coming to the University are recruited from those athletes and scholars who will surely go to some college and who are most likely to succeed. What would be your reaction and your advice if we told you that we are determined to stop competing with other institutions for the ghetto's relative and absolute successes and, instead, to begin recruiting its promising failures? Pursued as an institutional policy, this would mean that we would keep as many of our places and as much of our scholarship money as we dared for--say--the second quarter of black high school graduating classes. I use "second quarter" here figuratively to describe that place on the class list occupied by any black student who could profit himself and his society from the college education which will be denied him by a combination of poverty and past performance.

Question from the class: How would you identify him?

My answer: By asking principals, counselors, and teachers for a list of students who might make it in college if someone poured money and attention into their lives, but who wouldn't otherwise be candidates. Identifying, recruiting, and educating students from such a list would directly and rapidly broaden the base of educated black Americans. Instead of selfishly competing for our portion of a very narrow clientele--qualified black high school graduates--we would effectively serve the long range interests of society (instead of the short term needs of the university) by creating an educated class at a level of income and attainment where none had existed before and none is likely to exist in the near future.

Question: What would be their chances of making it here? It's hard enough when you come from the top of your high school graduating class and you already speak white American. It doesn't sound to me like they'd have a chance. (Sounds of approval from the class.)

My answer: You're right. They'd have no chance at all if we treated them more or less as we treat you. But I propose that we treat them differently. And now I want you to listen carefully, because this proposal could affect every one of you who is not in his last year at the University.

I propose that we recruit a large number of the students I have described.

The number should be large for at least two reasons: The initial rate of failure may be high; and universities are already well represented in the area of token programs. Having obtained a large number of such students, we should not only offer them twelve-month financial support but we should also give them personally and professionally to the best teachers on our campus. Without explaining the details of my plan, let me point out what its immediate impact is likely to be on the campus as we now know it--which means, in large part, its impact on you:

You are very likely to find yourselves without many of the professors you now regard as your best teachers, the ones who attract you to their subjects by means of their own engagement and communicable excitement. For they are the people most likely to be engagable in a tutorial scheme which would require the utmost of their energies and intellects. What you would get in large measure would be the leftovers, the teachers who have regarded their educations and their professional lives as desirable encapsulations, who have either forgotten or never knew the excitement of dialogue, and who regard love as an emotion reserved for their familial relationships.

"Now what do you say to that?" I asked, and I will never forget their answer, given on the Monday between Martin Luther King's death and burial.

"We might agree," they said, reflectively; "it's a high price that we might be willing to pay. But our parents would never let us. Just as soon as they knew what was really happening, they'd pull us out or find some way to force you to stop discrimination against us [their phrase, used with full consciousness of its irony]. And of course we'd act just like them--we'd never let you do it to our children either."

That's all there is to my cautionary tale. There's no more to it; and yet there's so much to it that I've used ten minutes of my alloted thirty to share it with you. Amongst all its meanings, this one seems most relevant to my subject today:

One hundred students in a Shakespeare class do not make a university; nor do the several hundred chairmen and teachers in this room comprise a profession. But someone, somewhere must make a beginning. My Shakespeare students rejected the concept of personal responsibility. Their rejection was normative; acceptance would have aberrant. I am inviting you, your departments, and your institutions to join me in aberrance.

The deviation to which I invite you is the one rejected by my students: I invite you to accept personal, departmental, and institutional responsibility for the illiteracy and anti-humanism which afflict the life of impoverished Americans. If each of us believes--as which of use does not?--that language is the clothing of life, then we cannot allow any child to go naked into the world. The children I am talking about are not our apparent responsibility. They are not the performance-oriented, right-answer machines who traditionally attend our colleges and universities. They are a breed apart, and we are inexorably breeding apartness into them and their progeny. Before the movement toward separation is irreversible, let us do what we can to alter the values and pratices of our separatist society.

What can we do? Let me begin by telling you about something that has been done, an adventure in participation during the past five years which has deeply involved some members of the Departments of English and Psychology and the School of Education at the University of Michigan.

In 1963 I agreed to attempt an English curriculum for a boys' reform school to be opened near Ann Arbor. My disqualifications for the task were enormous: Educated in Philosophy and English at Cornell, Cambridge, and Stanford; having prepared in the Renaissance and taught largely in that field at Michigan; ignorant of modern practices for teaching English in the schools; innocent of viable ideas for making change--I accepted the commission to make a reform school curriculum in English through a series of mischances and inadvertancies. Which I proceeded to compound with a mistake.

True to the sad history of innovation and innovators in schools at all levels, I began by examining myself instead of my subjects. Listening carefully to myself, I discovered that what was necessary to educate a-literate, il-literate, and anti-literate delinquents was a curriculum which would cause them to perform better. Obviously, my purpose must be to increase the quantity and quality of their literacy; equally obvious, then, my means must be devices to induce improved performance. Not once, not for a single moment, did it occur to me to enquire if I were dealing with children who cared about performance in its customary terms.

I then visited the schools--public, private, parochial, and penal schools at all levels in almost all sections of our country. My purpose was to discover the best practices for teaching literacy to the impoverished child, integrate them into a single program, and sign my name to it, a procedure sometimes identified as "scholarship." Only after I had visited the schools and talked to teachers and administrators, had returned to my study and tried to form the pieces into a coherent whole--only then did I remember a minor omission: I had forgotten to talk to the children.

Perhaps I would not have remembered at all had my son not been at an age to enter nursery school. Considering the question of his enrollment caused me to remember what I should never have forgotten. I have already told you a story from my university teaching experience; let me tell you another from the only other teaching experience I've had--in a nursery school.

My wife and I were graduate students at Stanford in the fifties. In the best graduate tradition, we were in some danger of starving to death. Sixteen hundred dollars in nine months was an income somewhat less than enough, even then, to feed, clothe, and house two large adults, even students. Before the end of the first quarter, our need was painfully clear; had our need not been greater than my pride, I suppose I would never have been the "male presence" in a nursery school.

Let charity keep you from imagining the expression on the woman's face (the woman who was offering two dollars an hour) when she said, "Well, we certainly never expected a man <u>your size</u> to answer our ad." What matters is that I didn't break and run for it, and I did get the job. The sole requirements upon me were

to attend the morning sessions of the nursery school and to play with the children. Within the context of available space and equipment, I could do what I liked. My presence was meant to serve as a kind of sizeable antidote to the female staff of the school, hopefully making the nursery school a little more like the real world.

In the first hour of my first morning I met David. David was four years old and from a well-to-do family, attributes which made him indistinguishable from the twenty-odd children who composed his group. But he was like them in little else, because he had been brain-damaged at birth. David suffered from a spasticity which caused uncontrolled spittle to run from his mouth, which forced him to walk with the aid of one tiny crutch, and which made him abnormally awkward in the use of his hands. He was intelligent and outgoing, but the nature of his affliction caused the other children to ignore or to abuse him.

One morning of watching the more secure children leave David to himself while the less secure, the ones most threatened by him yelled desperate words at him like "Get away!" and "Don't play here!" and "You're dirty, dirty, dirty!"--one morning of that was enough. When the children left, the nursery school director and her two helping teachers admitted to being deeply troubled by the children's treatment of David but also to being at an absolute loss for positive action. In fact, they said, they spent so much time protecting David that they were seriously considering asking his mother to withdraw him from school.

"Have you tried explaining about David to the other children?" I asked.

No, they hadn't done that because the children were too young to make any sense out of birth damage and it wasn't clear that understanding David's problem would really make any difference to the instinctive and fearful defenses which caused them to act as they did.

I agreed with some of what they said, but I refused to accept the rest. Perhaps it was true that four year olds were too young to understand David's problem in any logical sense of cause and effect, but I wouldn't believe that they couldn't make something useful to themselves of the explanation. All they needed, I thought, was a strong reason for understanding, and in their own way they'd understand whatever they had to. David needed a lever, and I thought I knew how to provide him one.

My scheme was as direct as the children. As the only man around, I was a coveted commodity. I was shamelessly courted and flirted with, but I was unavailable. Wherever I went, I took David. When I played in the sandbox, David played with me. When I read stories aloud, David sat in my lap. When I had juice and crackers, David sat next to me. And every child got the message: If they wanted me, they had to take him. Not only did they take him, they had to talk with him and about him. His wise mother had told David all he needed to know about his injury, and David--in a small shower of spittle--could talk about himself. So could the other children, and we did. We talked and we listened and we talked some more. One of his worst tormentors, a fiery little girl from a badly broken home, was the last one to join the conversation. She skittered around the edge of the group until one day she pushed two children

aside and made a real difference in David's life by taking the wad of Kleenex out of his shirt pocket and shoving it into his trouser pocket. She had seen what everyone else had missed--that David, with his "funny hands," couldn't pull Kleenex out of his shirt pocket to wipe his mouth but he could pull them out of his side pants pocket. After that first interaction with David, she seldom abused him again. Like the others, she understood, and her action was her way of admitting it.

I had listened, the children had listened, and we had both been better off for the conversation. I remembered thinking then--what has since been confirmed by every experience--that nobody talks with the children but everybody does to the children. And now, years later, I found myself doing to the children. Shamed by the memory and the realization, I went back to listen to them.

My first discovery was that they could not believe I really wanted their opinions--"Shoot," said one boy eloquently, "ain't nobody never asks us nothing." Said without emotion, the words are as flat as the child's school experience. He is, after all, taught by teachers to whom "professional excitement" is a phrase with an impossible contradiction between adjective and noun. Teachers moved by the content of the literature they teach, much less by the language of that literature, are even more rare in the primary and secondary schools of this country than they are at our colleges and universities....But I have gotten ahead of the story:

I went back to the schools and listened to the children. "Sure I can read," a fourteen year old boy finally admitted to me--after his English teacher had explained his behavioral problems by the fact of his illiteracy--"but if she [his English teacher] finds out, then I'm gonna have to read all that crap she's got."

"Listen," another one told me, " all you got to do is put your mind out to lunch for one period a day and you ain't got to bother with reading and writing."

"Them books," a young girl told me, "them books and how she teaches. She don't care nothing about us." Which was just about right. This particular teacher divided her time and her children's efforts amongst workbooks, trusted pieces of desiccated literature, and schemes for teaching--like sentence diagrams and lists of words--that sounded the depth of the chasm between her and the children.

I listened to the children and I listened to the teachers. I listened to adjectives the teachers used to describe the children, and I learned much from them. When I had recovered from the shock of hearing that impoverished children were "terminal" students--only teachers know enough about what happens in their classrooms to borrow a word from the death vocabulary of medicine to describe the condition of their students--I also heard that they are "practical" students. And, finally, in addition to "terminal" and "practical," I discovered that these children are temporary and rootless; in a word unused but meant by their teachers, they are "ephemeral."

"Turn your head and they're gone," I was told. "Look at 'em the wrong way and they disappear. They don't belong anywhere and they don't stay anywhere."

Speaking with the children and listening to their teachers led me back to my study, this time to make a program based upon something more reliable than a look at myself.

The program is simple; perhaps it is even simplistic in its unremitting emphasis upon a few aspects of teaching a willing literacy. In the three years since publication of our preliminary report--a book issued in 1966 called Hooked on Books--the program has expanded into all 50 states and a dozen other countries like Canada, Mexico, England, Italy, the Phillippines, and Australia. Most of this expansion took place before proof of the program's efficiency was available. In a book published in 1968--called Hooked on Books: Program and Proof--Professor McNeil and I reported that three years of testing confirmed the program's hypothesis: That changing a child's attitude toward literacy results in a direct and significant change in his performance.

The simple means for effecting that change in attitude are based entirely upon what teachers said of children and what children said of teachers and themselves. I listened when teachers described the children as "practical" and I asked myself what implications such an adjective might have for teaching them to read and write. I listened when children told me that the books they were given to read were one sure way they had of knowing how little their teachers knew about them. I listened when the teachers called the children something like "ephemeral" and the children said that learning to read and write was avoidable. From that listening came the program of "English in Every Classroom," an approach to teaching literacy which is based upon the dual principles of diffusion and saturation.

The principle of diffusion arises directly from the notion of "practical" students. According to their teachers, practical students are children who must have teachers, practical students are children who must have apparent and immediate reasons for all of their actions. They are children who are not very good at gratification deferment and who are generally unable to accept more than a brief temporal gap between cause and effect. Which all means, for teaching them literacy, that such children are unlikely to see any practical reason to learn anything so difficult as reading and writing if it is taught only by English teachers. The first premise of this program, therefore, and the one from which "English in Every Classroom" takes its name, is that every teacher in every classroom must be a teacher of English or practical children will discover that literacy can be avoided.

Consider just one of the implications of diffusing the responsibility for teaching literacy amongst the entire faculty: If the student takes five academic subjects and is required to write every day in English class and every other day in all other classes, he will write thirty times in each two-week period. A child who writes fifty words on thirty separate occasions in ten school days will write nearly fifteen thousand words in class in a single semester. If such a requirement does nothing else, it convinces the child that writing is as necessary to his survival in school as lunchtime and recess. Being a practical child, he is likely to do what is necessary in order to survive.

If the principle of diffusion speaks to the child's practicality, the principle of saturation is meant to appeal both to his practical and his ephemeral needs.

"Saturation" refers to the practice of filling the child's school environment with newspapers, magazines, and paperback books. Saturate each academic classroom with ephemeral materials and have every teacher teach from them; fill the library and the cafeteria with newspapers, magazines, and paperbound books: The practical child will discover that reading is easier to attempt than to avoid, and the ephemeral child will discover that impermanent materials make reading a congenial pursuit of himself, today, instead of an alien quest for somebody else, yesterday. And he will read because he wants to.

I have taken your time to recount a small part of our experience because I believe it is a useful if limited example of how English professors and English departments can engage professionally and meaningfully in the education of impoverished children. I do not believe, however, that our story exemplifies a major, or, perhaps, even a significant portion of what can be done. More important, I think, is the conviction upon which our experience was based, and the significance of that belief for impoverished Americans.

Every one in this room believes in the future because he remembers the past. Because we know that we are the product of the past, we can believe that our existence implies the future and <u>that we must prepare ourselves for it</u>. This is the <u>sole belief</u> required of mentally normal children and adults before they may be called "educable" in the best sense of that word. This is also the sole belief to which a man must subscribe in order to deserve the name of humanist.

If we are indeed to deserve the name, we must become preachers of the Word that name implies. For we do only the easier part of our duty when we convert the undergraduate heathen. Anxious to believe, they accept the past because they are in love with the future. Let us now go out of the university and try to sell our wares in a more difficult market place, where love is a rare currency never wasted on tomorrow.

I believe the clear duty of every individual and department within the humanistic disciplines is publicly to advocate the conviction that each man must be both inheritor and contributor within a society that did not begin this morning and will not expire tonight. This public advocacy is worth no more than virtue untested if it is not taken beyond the walls of the university ghetto in order to make that inheritance meaningful and that contribution possible. And that is what each of us should be doing. I invite you to participate professionally in the reclamation of alienated and despairing children and adults. Our humanism is our profession. If we cannot carry its values into a world impoverished by its absence, then both our humanity and our profession must be sick and in doubt.