DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 170 TE 001 721

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TITLE Toward a Unified Curriculum in English.
INSTITUTION Alberta Teachers Association, Edmonton.
PUB DATE 69
NOTE 5p.; Transcribed from a tape-recording of address to the Alberta English Council's annual convention in Red Deer, April 1969
JOURNAL CIT Alberta English '69; v9 n2 p5-9 Fall 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Objectives, Composition (Literary), Creativity, *Educational Development, Educational History, Educational Improvement, *Educational Objectives, Emotional Experience, *English Curriculum, English Instruction, *Imagination, Language Arts, Literature, Relevance (Education)

ABSTRACT

Educators have worked long and strenuously, but a unified English curriculum has not yet been attained. The language arts-skills approach, the communications approach, and the tripod approach haven't worked. Recently, modern linguists have argued that language study belongs to the liberal arts, not to the behavioral sciences; behaviorists have moved into literature study with programmed texts of literary works; and some psychologists and students have expressed the belief that an emotional experience is a necessary instrument for learning. Complicating the English curriculum dilemma are the present insistence upon measurable behavioral objectives and the ascendancy of film study, film making, and visual literacy. Apparently, a new goal for English is needed--to keep alive and to foster and educate the imagination. Present social conditions imply a failure to educate people to emphasize with others or to reorder imaginatively the every day world. A reformed English curriculum would de-emphasis structure and would focus on educating the living imagination. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (JM)

Alberta English '69; Vol. 9, No. 2,
FALL 1969

Toward a Unified Curriculum in English

ROBERT F. HOGAN

An old friend of English education in Alberta, Robert Hogan here glances at some of the historical problems which have troubled English teachers, and then offers a new goal for our discipline – centered on the educated imagination.

At least until now our great vision of a unified English Curriculum - in the sense that high school teachers of English and elementary teachers of Language Arts, and perhaps even teachers of introductory college courses in English, would ever join hands in a common cause that everybody would understand and agree to - I would count as a Utopian dream. Throughout history, both in Europe and America, there have been many efforts to set up Utopias, all of them failing. And so it is for the dream of the unified English curricula. Here we are, and have been, charged with the responsibility for everything from spelling to Shakespeare, from the morality play to the theatre of the absurd, from the spoken word to the written word to the printed word to the electronic image, from handwriting to Hardy to the humanities, from literacy to literature. Fearing in a poem tried to summarize the plight of modern man in the image of one trying to compose a symphony out of a wedding march, a drinking song, and a dirge; how much more complex, it seems to me, has been the challenge we have set for ourselves or that ot· . have set for us.

And yet we've tried: English as a distinguishable subject in the schools didn't even exist until the late 19th century. From the very beginning of common schooling they set out to teach literacy in order that the students might participate in religious tradition and in the rudimentary economy of the time. And for those of them who survived that rigor, the schools taught literature to give them access to the cultural heritage and the moral tradition. But no one until the late 19th Century ever proposed that as a unified curriculum. Eventually, though, English caught on as the umbrella for the tent under which we might group these efforts, but umbrellas and tents are gathering places - they are not organizing principles. And it was for that which we searched - some kind of organizing principles to give focus toward a common goal for the first grade teacher, the sixth grade teacher, the ninth and twelfth grade teacher, and perhaps even for the teacher of the undergraduate English courses in colleges and universities.

And how thoroughly have we failed so far. In the late '30s and mid-'40s we committed ourselves to the "Language Arts"

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(we meant *skills*, even though we spoke about *arts)*. We set out to teach children to read, write, speak, and listen, and gave ancillary attention to more mechanical matters like spelling, handwriting and punctuation. After a while the operational flaws became much too apparent. Not only did we begin to include things like introductory units on the telephone in junior high school for students who had been answering the telephone since before they went to school, but we lost all sight of our subject matter. At that time in the early '40s anything written in English became English. And it didn't work.

During the late '40s and early '50s we tried communications as the binding image and somehow we always spelled it and pronounced it with a plural "s". *Communications.* General semantics looked not only promising, but interesting. And we swam confusedly through a sea of communications. We couldn't even recognize important landmarks pointed out by the esoteric behavior of social scientists who brought light to shed on our plight. Eventually we sat through convention sessions reportedly about communication, and we couldn't understand a single sentence they were saying. If it was Utopia we wanted, that wasn't it, and we set out on another search.

If we could agree on what English was, we could agree then on what English teachers should be doing. We heard experts telling us that what we needed was a sense of the structure of our discipline. And so we left the language arts skills approach and the communications approach and tried for a good long while the content approach. Our enthusiasm resided not only in the hope that we could thus identify what our subject was, but that we might in the process make clear what it wasn't, which is to say that we could make clear which of society's imperatives we weren't responsible for. If we could say, as we did, that English was the study of language, written composition, and literature, we could leave to the Establishment to figure out who should be charged with teaching, say, "literacy", as long as it wasn't us. And that's about where we stood until a couple of years ago - firmly atop a tripod of language, literature, and written composition. And it's from that sturdy but indefensible structure that we have wandered to our present position, our present plight.

The parsimony of the tripod image is attractive only to those who like the image of the teacher that emerges from Auden's *Unknown Citizen*. The teacher, that is, who likes it when the students do not interfere with his teaching. He knows what he wants to do, and takes this for what he is meant to do, and all he asks of the administration is that they supply him with students who encourage or at least allow him to do his thing. We haven't yet reached Eldorado, and the need for reform is clear.

The hidden agenda item in most discussions on reform in English teaching is our shifting commitment to one of two camps of learning theory, in traditional ignorance of a third camp. We know about behaviorism, since to that camp we have been happy to consign language teaching and much of rhetoric. Because language and composition are the two areas in which the proofs of our success or failure are there for all to see, we are happy to listen to anyone who promises us that his strategy will make visible difference, a measurable difference, in the behavior of children. And even if it means laying in a supply of raisins, paid for out of the instructional budget of the beginning reading program, we'll do that too. Then there is the camp of cognitive development, going back to Aristotle and finding its modern spokesmen in such men as Bruner in psychology.

Although we have been content to sell usage of English to charlatans, we've protected literature. To give literature to the behaviorists would be like surrendering art to those who think that they can teach painting by numbers.

Three things have happened. First

modern linguists argue that the intensive study of language structure offers little hope for changing language behavior, and that language study belongs to the liberal arts, not to the behavioral sciences - which is to say they have shifted to the cognitive camp. Second, although we were shocked, the behaviorists have moved into literature. There is a programmed text for "Stopping By Woods" available now with 127 different frames. And when you finish that, there is a programmed text for *Hamlet*. Meanwhile the lay public wants to know what provable - which is to say "measureable" - difference all this makes.

Apart from finding out that our two categories, behaviorism and cognition, weren't as imperative as we thought they might be, a third category has been introduced, a third camp of learning theory, related to neither of the two we have been comforted with before. Non-Freudian psychologists have been increasingly interested in the emotional experience as an instrument for learning. In the last year or two it has erupted into open debates between shaggy students and balding Deans on most of our college campuses. Debates about irrelevance, relevance, about triviality and significance. And at the heart of the discussion is the concern on the part of many students and some psychologists that if the end of education is to produce a change in behavioral pattern, or a personality construct, or an aptitudinal set, an intense emotional experience by itself offers a degree of promise that we've ignored in our earlier assignments of our goals and our content to either cognition or behaviorism.

This approach finds no convenient place in our usual notion of courses or credit, which is why we now face the reality of free universities, underground newspapers, and the demand for student-centered, interest-centered, credit courses on our various campuses. The University of Illinois, for example, now offers freshmen seminars without any prerequisites. If twelve or more students say they want a course on anything, the administration must assign an interested faculty member to that course, and then the students and faculty member decide how many credits that course is worth, and what they have to do to earn them.

An 8–state consortium in Denver concluded a couple of years ago that without some wholesale curriculum reform, such "content heavy" subjects as English and the Social Studies would have to concede time to new subject matter imperatives. Their point was not an argument against our traditional goals as we have stated them, but a recognition that at least in the United States language arts instruction gets about 50% of the total instructional effort in primary grades, and about 24% of the total instructional effort in grades eight through twelve. And the undeniable outcome, at least in parts of our country, is that many students need English as a subject, and graduate from high school if they survive it - and one-third of them don't. The two-thirds that do, graduate from high school as adult non-readers. They know how to read but they don't. A few know how to write, but they don't. Insofar as that charge is accurate, perhaps the conclusion that we simply must give up time is inevitable.

Another reason for being concerned is the present ascendance of the new media. For about ten years or so we argued fruitlessly with librarians about who owns the books. At various times the NCTE has taken a public stand in favor of classroom libraries of paperbound books, and has asked for 500 paperback books in every high school English classroom - and brought down the wrath of the American Association of School Librarians who felt *they* owned the books, which ought to be in their library, not our classroom. And while the English teachers and librarians sat there arguing for a decade, a whole generation of audio-visual specialists came into being and promoted their equipment, their "hardware". Meanwhile the English teachers and the librarians had been so lost in combat that no

one had done anything at all about the necessary software.

Now more recently we have been caught up by a wave of film study, film-making, and visual literacy, and once again we are so concerned about who owns the books, that the film people will perhaps have their own department, and do in some ways much better what we have been trying to do. We must reconsider our disciplines in order to discover what place film study might have in them.

Now I'm not sure of the climate in Canada with the strong support of the National Film Board, but in the United States the typical stance of the English teacher falls somewhere along a predictable continuum. Now, in the middle is the position, "Hamlet's on television tonight, why don't some of you watch it?" On the far left - and there are not many people - are those who throw the books out and study very closely the grammar of the film . . . On the other end of the continuum is the notion that, "If we can't stop them watching television, by George we'll at least make them feel guilty about it!"

Another cause for concern is the recent marriage of the systems analyst and the behavioral scientist, and their insistence upon measurable behavioral objectives . . . Typical research is devoted to what they call "task analysis and role differentiation." They're trying to figure out what we do – teachers and administrators and other people connected with education – the specific tasks which all of us have, and redistribute these among the new pyramid of educational personnel. Administrators, meanwhile, are taking courses in "sensitivity training", so that they can put to productive uses the anxiety they generate in us when they have redistributed our tasks among other educational personnel.

. . . Another group will find out how we are going to evaluate accomplishment in English, but if you can't state it in terms of behavioral goals, the chances of your getting it into the curriculum in any other category than "frill" are going to be slight. And if all we have to counter that is another unit from "L'Allegro", perhaps we deserve to lose the battle.

. . . And the awareness from at least some of our children that the program is actually stultifying. The typical third grade child will say, "Give the cookies to John and me," and by the time he is in the eighth grade half of them are saying, "Give the cookies to John and I." And one of the things that happened is that we taught them grammar.

. . . When children first enter school, there is nothing for them much more exciting and much more natural than memorization and recitation - just listen to them on the playground. By the time they reach the eleventh grade, nothing is more uncomfortable or more unnatural. And we can blame all this on puberty if we want to, but only if we ignore what's happening to the oral tradition in the schools . . . And yet we don't give up; we believe in memorization and recitation, and we have a whole structure of arguments to defend them . . . Like many British headmasters, teachers have felt that it was enough if it was hard and the boys didn't like it. Then there are the people who still believe in mental faculty - that if we make them memorize poetry we will train their memory. Then there are the tender-hearted souls who believe that if we get them to memorize six or eight verses, later on when things get grim they can go off to a corner with their favorite little verse and survive. Then there are the retroactive motivationists, who accept the fact that children don't like to memorize, but later on they'll be glad that they did.

. . . We need a new goal for English . . . *let me suggest that the goal is to keep alive and to foster and educate the imagination.* This it seems to me, is what the Dartmouth Seminar was all about. And the failure of our culture to see that it has led to riots in our cities, vandalism in our schools, racism almost unbridled, and it's what underlies the problem of the West Indians and the Pakistani in

England, and it's also what underlies the problem of the Indians in Alberta. We failed to educate people to imagine what it is like to be anybody else. If the people in the near South Side of Chicago could really imagine what it is like to be a black in a Chicago ghetto, their attitude towards the Chicago blacks might be different. And if the Chicago blacks could but imagine what it's like to be a lower-class Polish laborer in a neighborhood that is about to go down the drain he might better understand the reaction of the Polish laborer. We have failed to do that - we've failed to educate them to imagine that their lives could be any different. There are people now living – third generation ghetto children in the Chicago slums – the tragedy about them is that they can't imagine that life could be any different. We fail to educate people to imagine what it is like to be other people, and we fail to educate people to imagine what it would be like if their lives were different. And we failed – if you look at your grammar books – to make clear that the basic function of language is not communicating with other people, but ordering imaginatively the world we live in, and re-ordering it, and re-ordering it, and finding out from all the re-orderings the best possible order.

. . . One of the things we are going to have to do is to listen to the children in a way that we haven't listened, and to capitalize on their life energies as we plan the direction of the curriculum. We are going to have to practice what we aspire to: We are going to have to spend some time alone and with our colleagues imagining what it is like to be a child, to be an adolescent in 1969 or 1970. And we'll keep that in mind every time we pass back a composition - we must imagine what it is like to get back what we are handing back. We must keep that in mind every time we select and assign a poem - not whether or not it is respectable, but whether it has the capacity to move and excite the child. We'll keep that in mind as we respond to their spontaneous use of language. A second-grade class was asked to draw a picture about how they felt, and then write a sentence or two explaining the picture. One child drew a picture of a tombstone, and on it wrote his name, and underneath, "Sometimes I wish I was dead." - and all the teacher did was to cross out "was" and write in "were". Obviously for years this teacher hadn't imagined what it's like to be a second grade child who wishes he was dead.

. . . We must try to rise above whatever it is in the curriculum that stultifies and prevents the growth that we see. If we do this, involving ourselves - our awkward, clumsy, self-conscious selves - in things like creative dramatics, dramatic play and improvisation, if we spend more time than we have in the past with creative expression and creative writing, and on literature that is engaging and exciting, and offers some hope of capturing the life energies of the children - if we do all that, we still probably will not end up with a unified discipline that we dream about even now. But we may have a discipline with a pulsating core. We might end up with a discipline that's not really unified or ordered, like one of those tic-tac-toe, parallelled, right-angled, planned mid-western cities, but we could end up with San Francisco, Boston, New Orleans, London or Paris. We'd end up--not with the blueprint--but with a hub. Not with a shape, but with a center. All along we have searched for some shape or structure to our discipline, when what we should have been looking for was more like a magnetic field. Let's borrow our metaphor not from the architect or engineer, but from the astronomer, and let's create not a structure of English, but a galaxy of English with the living imagination as its sun. ●