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ABSTRACT

Innovations in the English curriculum are more talked about than implemented. Curriculum changes, some with profound implications, are occurring; however, such changes affect only a few schools. Student dissatisfaction with current course offerings is increasing. (CK)

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INNOVATIONS OR DEBILITATIONS? CAVEATS AND QUANDARIES ABOUT ENGLISH PROGRAMS

by EDMUND J. FARRELL

Address to the NEATE at its meeting in Boston on December 5, 1970

One invited to speak to his colleagues about innovations in the English Curriculum is inevitably tempted to present a catalog of all the grand and groovy things that seem to be going on everywhere except where members of his audience teach, somewhat in the vein of the rooster who, upon spying a football in the lot adjoining the henyard, called the hens over, pointed, and lugubriously muttered, "Girls, I don't want to complain. I just want you to know what they're doing over there."

If one were to misinterpret what is in the wind for what is in the schools, he would assume that every school child in America now has a program that is ungraded, elective, flexible, modular, individualized, and child or student centered; that each is being taught by a differentiated staff of professionals and paraprofessionals who team teach, tutor, manage learning environments, and are forever accountable, both morally and fiscally, for the success of their methods; and that all schools have skills centers, listening and viewing carrels, programmed and computer-assisted instruction, closed circuit and broadcast television, folding walls, carpeted floors, and libraries of instructional materials fit for even the most sluggardly learner: films, film strips, records, tape cassettes, videotapes, microfiche, and books, the latter for those anti-McLuhan Luddites who prefer pondering and savoring to glimpsing and auding.

The truth, of course, is that curricular changes are more heralded than hearkened to. For every teacher who did her homework and moved in the past decade from Latinate to descriptive to generative grammar, there are probably three who eschewing such fads, have kept to old-fashioned parsing, knowing in their heart of hearts that eventually the truth will out, at which time they will be vindicated by the profession for their perspicacity, honored by their peers for their fidelity, and loved in reverie by all their former students who didn't appreciate them then.

To indicate the discrepancy between words about innovation and deeds in the schools, one need only turn to the Squire-Applebee report *High School Instruction Today*, in which he learns that in the 158 high schools in 45 states selected to be studied largely for their distinguished reputations in English, the teachers of English who were observed em-

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This article, expressing Mr. Farrell's personal view, in no way represents official policy of NCTE.

ployed audiovisual methods of instruction less than 2 percent of the time and Socratic questioning less than 3 percent of the time. Recently the USOE reported that in the school year 1969-70, only about 2 percent of the students enrolled in grades 1-12 were in ungraded classes or schools.

I do not wish to suggest that innovations in the curriculum, some with profound implications, are not occurring, for they most assuredly are; nor do I wish to play a numbers game that dismisses as inconsequential for the curriculum any innovation not championed by the majority of students and teachers. For the past five years one national poll after another has informed us that activist or militant students comprise far less than one-third of the student bodies of those institutions most frequently rent by violence. The great majority notwithstanding, that small minority has forever transformed the processes if not the commitments and the nature of American higher education. Too, the 2 percent who attended ungraded classes or schools in 1969-70 totaled 930,000 students, a number sufficiently large to command the attention if not the respect of any director of curriculum.

The school, as an institution within the society, cannot escape reflecting, at least in part, the pressures and confusions and wrenches within the greater social body that contains it. We live in awesome and perplexing times: knowledge doubles in a decade; astronauts' voices are transmitted live from 200,000 miles in space, communication satellites encompass the globe; automation displaces 3,000,000 miners in 15 years; population growth threatens to engulf us within a century; students of an afternoon cross the Atlantic river; urbanization continues and slums multiply; pollution permeates the skies above us and the waters below; drugs are wantonly consumed both over and underground; electronic, genetic, and pharmacological control of human life is almost upon us; racism rots the nation, while Viet Nam scars its soul; values are transient, and God is declared dead; in storage is the equivalent of fifteen tons of TNT for every person on earth, but the arms race persists; parents are estranged from their children, and the eldest brother no longer understands the youngest. As citizens and teachers, we are not agreed about whether to be permissive or repressive toward the young, content centered or student centered, generalists or specialists, spokesmen for the past or harbingers of the future. As human beings, we feel the lamentations of Job echoing in our bloodstreams.

In order to understand why the schools became what they were for over half a decade, we must first defer to the past. As Raymond Callahan documents in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, until the turn of the century, school administrators were in the main persons who artic-

lated the curriculum to the community on philosophical grounds. However, with the growth of business and industry in the nation, with the taxes for the schools predicated largely on the taxes on industry, and with the influence upon industry of cost-efficiency experts like Frederick R. Taylor and Frank B. Gilbreth, administrators were increasingly forced to defend the curriculum not in terms of its philosophical worth but in terms of its efficiency. The consequence was that education in this country modeled itself after the factory; schools became "plants"; administrators, often more Rotarian than educator in outlook and spirit, became mediators between the business community and the teachers, whom they employed and who stood in relationship to them, business-like, as line to staff; with the formulation of the Carnegie unit in 1908, students began to be programmed in so many courses over so many days over so many years, finally to emerge at the end of the assembly line as "products" of the institution.

The factory model can not hold and is not holding in a society which has become transistorized, computerized, and cybernated; in which information is a free-floating commodity, conveyed and consumed more rapidly outside of the schools than within; in which knowledge and jobs change so quickly that the schools can no longer educate for what is but can only help prepare people to make intelligent choices in the variegated lights of what may be.

And yet, ironically, at the very time when they have been attempting to shed an inappropriate and archaic model borrowed from industry, the USOE has been encouraging upon the schools a model which may prove not only inappropriate but even more inhumane than that which preceded it, a "new" model drawn partially from industry, with its emphasis upon systems analysis, and partially from the military, with its paper commitments to performance objectives. I say "paper commitments" because recent studies of military contracts would lead one to believe that the Pentagon should be the last agency to consult for models of efficient management.

To have some understanding of the military-industrial chasm between word and deed, I recommend to you the history of both the C5A jet transport program, which, under Lockheed's management and Pentagon approval, had a $2-billion overrun in cost and the more ill-fated F111 jet fighter program, which, under General Dynamics' management and Pentagon specifications, will cost taxpayers $9-billion for planes so unsafe that the 225 produced for the Air Force have been grounded since last December 22. On May 11 *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekley*, scarcely a mouthpiece of the New Left, featured a lengthy arti-

cle on the F-111 titled "Incredible Contract: General Dynamics' Gain Is the Nation's Loss." The article reports that the aircraft failed to meet its contracted performance specifications by the following percentages: 82,500 pounds vs. 69,122 (a 20 percent deficiency); maximum speed at high altitude, mach 2.2 vs. mach 2.5 (12 percent too slow); combat ceiling, 58,000 feet vs. 62,300 (7 percent short); take off distance, 3,550 feet vs. 2,780 (28 percent too much); ferry range, 2,750 miles vs. 4,180 (a 34 percent deficiency); supersonic dash distance, 30 miles vs. the specified 210 (an 85 percent deficiency); acceleration time (from mach .9 to mach 2.2) four minutes vs. the contracted time of 1.45 minutes. The cost of the F-111, to put money if not priorities into perspective, will be approximately double the total federal education budget which Mr. Nixon vetoed earlier this year because he found it inflationary.

The Pentagon aside, for I do not want to be accused of begging the issue, I find the movement to impose behavioral and performance objectives upon the Curriculum in English and to hold teachers financially accountable for the success of their methods ill-founded for a number of reasons:

First, those advocating the movement presume that one can determine prior to knowing the students what it is they should understand or be able to do as a consequence of their experiences with the curriculum. Students are thereby eliminated from being either planners of, or participants in defining, what their educations are to be. Because it is occurring at a time when increasing numbers of young people are demanding the right to establish their own educational goals and to select the processes by which to accomplish them, the movement may invite additional student unrest and increased violence or disruption in the schools.

One attending seriously to the excerpts from the high-school underground press found in *How Old Will You Be in 1984*, edited by Diane Divoky (Discus/Avon/W174, 1969) and in *Our Time Is Now*, edited by John Birmingham (Praeger, 1970) cannot help being struck by the fervor with which students attack prescribed curricula, including required reading of the classics. Listen, for example, to this excerpt from *TIME'S UP*, Cambridge High and Latin School, Cambridge, Massachusetts:

> *Ivanhoe, Silas Marner, Christmas Carol, The Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, Lady of the Lake:* The names of these books are familiar to us. Why? Have these books ever been on the best sellers list? Have we ever seen them being bought up feverishly at the newstands? Are these books the ones that our friends recommend? No! We know these books only because they are the sole stock of our English Book Room. For years

> C. H. L. S. has been plagued by these books and it probably will be plagued for years to come unless something is done. (*How Old Will You Be in 1984:* pg. 71)

The author then proceeds, somewhat illogically to be sure; to argue the merits, if not superiority, of contemporary literature. I am concerned, of course, with how well the student marshals his case against Scott, Dickens, Eliot, and Shakespeare; but I am just as concerned, as you should be and as Charles Silberman clearly is, with the student's anger, with his feeling that his curiosity, his desire, his will have been subordinated to a course of study sanctified only by time and the powerlessness of students to determine or revise its contents.

Second, the movement to establish behavioral and performance objectives for all components of the curriculum puts an unwarranted stress on evaluation, again at a time when students are insisting that schools are already far too competitive and concerned about testing. George Leonard, author of *Education and Ecstasy*, observed in a speech at the NCTE Convention in Milwaukee that if one wants to put an end to learning, all he need do is begin testing. Mr. Leonard then reported that in a school district of his acquaintance, administrators and teachers became alarmed about the number of comic books students were reading. Curious about the students' retention of funny-book knowledge, the teachers decided to issue comic books to students on each Monday and to test for retention on each Friday. Within three weeks there wasn't a student in the district who willingly read a comic book. Mr. Leonard concluded that if we are truly concerned about population growth, all we need do is proliferate our sex education courses and commence testing.

To suggest to you the disgust with testing shared by many bright students, I again turn to the high-school underground press and to an article written by Rogers Lang for *THE BARNACLE,* Manchester Memorial High School, Manchester, New Hampshire.

> Another day, another study. Excitement. Got some work to do today. Big test tomorrow. Very important. Got to study hard. Got to know the answers. Answers to what? To the questions, obviously. The teacher stands up there and asks the Questions. We sit and write the answers. Why have Questions? So the teacher can see if we know the Answers. Why have Answers? So we can get the Questions right and get Good Grades. Very important. Who the hell cares about the Good Grades? We do, if we want to be Good Students. So we learn Answers to Questions that don't make sense and aren't supposed to make sense. We also follow Rules. No Smoking.

> No Gum, No Talking. No Etc. Education. Very Important . . . Wow. (*How Old Will You Be in 1984?* pg. 57)

Third, the movement supported by the behaviorists glorifies a pseudo-scientific quantification of learning. In an article written for *NCSPS News,* February, 1970, Leon Lessinger, former associate commissioner of education in USOE and high prophet for accountability and behavioral objectives, wrote, "Instead of vague promises to provide students with 'an opportunity to communicate effectively,' instructional program objectives should be stated in terms as specific as these in the following example:

> Given three days and the resources of the library, the student completing this program will be able to write a 300 to 500 word set of specifications for constructing a model airplane that another student could follow and build."

The objectives appear to be rigorous, specific, and scientifically designed until one asks such questions as these: Why a set of specifications rather than a poem? Why three days in the library? Why not two, or one, or an afternoon? Why the library at all? Why not a local hobby shop? Why 300-to-500 words? Why not 250-to-450? Or 127-to-413? What about that other student? Is he literate? Does he like to build model airplanes? And so on.

What I am implying, obviously, is that there is no such thing as an objective test. All that the word *objective* signifies is a reliable, not necessarily valid, means of quantifying responses; in the act of selecting what is to be learned, one is always subjective. When a universe of choice exists in the subject matter, as it does for English, one's subjectivity should be informed and guided by sound philosophical and pedagogical principles. Otherwise, he furthers the mindlessness of American education scored by Mr. Silberman throughout *Crisis in the Classroom.* But sound philosophical and pedagogical principles are exactly what I find wanting in the writing of proponents for accountability via behavioral objectives and performance testing. Economics and philosophy are not necessarily synonomous, and a dollar saved just might be a child lost.

Fourth, advocates of the movement appear to make the simplistic assumption that a school-age child is, if not a piece of steel, a *tabula rasa* without prior or competitive life experiences (*ergo,* the teacher can be held fiscally responsible for the quality and quantity of the child's knowledge and skills). The assumption ignores not only the effects of preschool experiences upon the child but the effects upon learning of such potent forces as genes, peer values, parental expectations, acne, or falling in love, none of which are under the teacher's control.

Fifth, proponents of behavioral or performance objectives seem naively to assume that all things are quantifiable and that one can be certain of the antecedents or stimuli that provoke human behavior. I am not one to denigrate careful lesson planning, nor am I ready to dismiss stimulus-response learning as a sound and efficient means of teaching necessary skills, including many associated with reading and composing. However, as Mr. Silberman indicates, behaviorism leads to training; and training, though a component of education, is certainly not the whole of education. Stimulus-response psychology is an inept guide for the teaching of literature, for example, for it makes one of behavior and experience. A student can vicariously experience the world of a novel, and the totality of that experience can be private and unquantifiable by measures of overt behavior. And even if the experience were quantifiable, one would need to decide whether the instruments of evaluation promote or detract from the larger objective of literary appreciation. As a person who despised a poorly taught and insanely demanding graduate course in 18th Century English literature but who nevertheless managed to get an *A* for his efforts, I am unwilling to equate demonstrable success on tests with love of learning. *A* or no, Pope and Swift continue to get short shrift in my library.

I have dwelt as long as I have on the current efforts to impose behavioral and performance objectives on all aspects of learning because I believe the movement to be on a collision course with almost every other effort being made to reform the English curriculum. From reports of the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth; from the growth of free schools for dropouts from public education and of "free day" classrooms in elementary schools; from the multiplication of ungraded and elective programs; from the creation of new courses in language, ethnic literatures, and non-print media; and from the current emphasis on individualized instruction, one can draw one consistent implication: namely, that the English curriculum must be freed from unnecessary constraints, constraints which do not allow it to respond relevantly to the velocity of change within the society and the consequent changing needs of learners, to the gravity of problems confronting mankind, and to the exponential growth of knowledge about our subject, particularly knowledge about the critical ways in which language mediates between an individual and his world, the ways in which it shapes and interprets human experience.

Teachers of English who attempt to liberate the schools from a factory model of education run the danger of trivializing the curriculum, a

danger most apparent in elective programs which allow teachers and students to "do their things," not all of which may seem equally worth doing or equally germane to the subject. Too, in attempting to woo students to their wares, teachers in elective programs may huckster with all the subtlety of a circus barker or a Mad Avenue pitchman. Allow me to provide examples that recently crossed my desk In glancing through the course offerings of a junior high school experimenting with an elective program, I was struck by the frenetic tone of the style:

> Myths and Folklore—Ride on the winged chariot of the sun, kill the monster Grendel with your bare hands, fight along side Lancelot in the forefront of King Arthur's army! Explore the legends that have stirred the imagination and blood of young people for the last two thousand years. Live again in your mind the deeds of might and valor, of heroines and heroes, of traitors and patriots.

And, then, with a curiously discordant dying fall, the description ends, "This course offers a stimulating and entertaining adventure in reading and writing."

Here is another example:

> Mysteries—Who dunnit? Was it the butler, the maid, or the "Redhead"? In this action-packed course you will meet the greatest spell-binders of the mystery world. Chills will run up and down your spine as you figure out from the "clue" who is the murderer. Plan your own "perfect crime." The flash of a knife in the alley, a scream in the dark, the ghostly shadow flitting away from the scene of the crime. Pick this course, if you think you can stand the excitement.

I would like to have a candid camera on the faces of junior high students reading that paragraph for the first time, though I am not sure I would want the mike to be live.

Despite the deep misgivings I have about the loss of a common learning—it was only slightly more than a decade ago that members of the Conference on Basic Issues in the Teaching of English proposed "An Articulated Curriculum For English Programs: A Hypothesis to Test"—I recognize that the penalty in education for living in a post-industrial, technetronic society is that, in Yeats' words, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." With all its risks of triviality and fragmentation, if not of anarchy, I prefer the richest possible pluralism for American education: elective and ungraded programs; mini-courses; student-directed courses; the Parkway program in Philadelphia and the John Adams' program in Portland, Oregon; independent study; tutorials; work-study pro-

grams; store front schools and private academies; programs in Chicano studies, in black studies, in American Indian studies; and, yes, in women's liberation. Better the multiplicity of approaches through which a pluralistic people might find their way to self-identity, self-integrity, knowledge and, let us hope, wisdom than the shackles of a single model, even one stamped "Government Approved."