DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 116 TE 002 426

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TITLE	English Electives Passes a Test: An Abstract of an Evaluation of the Electives Program at Scarsdale High School.
PUB DATE	Feb 71
NOTE	9p.
JOURNAL CIT	English Record; v21 n3 p52-60 Feb 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Elective Subjects, *English Programs, *Evaluation Techniques, *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS	New York, Scarsdale

ABSTRACT

An evaluation of the reading and writing capabilities of students who took English electives rather than the traditional course is discussed briefly. Results show that the electives program was teaching as much as the traditional classes, and the students themselves see it as a distinct improvement over the traditional. (DB)

English Record,
Vol. 21, No. 3,
February 1971.

ENGLISH ELECTIVES PASSES A TEST: An Abstract of an Evaluation of the Electives Program at Scarsdale High School

Franklin G. Myers

If the proof of English Electives lay in the taking, there would have been no need for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Electives program which began at Scarsdale, New York High School in September, 1968. That autumn about 500 juniors and seniors, given their choice of traditional classes in English 3 or 4 or ungraded quarter-year courses from which they might select four annually, opted for Electives. Eleven sections of traditional English took care of the 253 students unwilling to be among the first by whom the new is tried. In the second year only 143 elected traditional courses, with 653 choosing Electives. This year we have only four sections to accommodate the 91 desiring English 3 or 4; the remainder are taking Electives.

Neither the English Department nor the school administration, however, was willing to judge a program on its popularity. Even as we were planning the Electives program, we were saying it was necessary to conduct a study that would in some way compare the effectiveness of "Electives English" with that of the traditional courses. The phrase "within three years" was used glibly, and suddenly all thoughts of evaluation disappeared as the reality of managing and teaching so complex a group of course offerings occupied all of us. Last year the ghost of "within three years" began to haunt us. Our visitors—and there have been many—would ask, "How well does it work?" Students and their parents, trying to choose which program to take in their terminal high school years, would inquire, "Will it be as good as the regular courses for helping us get along in college?" And the department itself was concerned: "Are the kids in Electives writing as well as those in the other program?" Discussions of *that* question only proved that tempers vary directly with the heat of opinions.

It was plainly time for an evaluation and a comparison. We knew what we wanted to test: Were our Electives students, with their often eclectic choices and frequent shifts of teachers, learning to read and write as well as those in the traditional course which methodically demanded of the students the equiva-

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lent of an exposition a week based upon the reading in their ten-week forays into the genres of fiction, non-fiction, drama and poetry? We knew also that, to get valid statistics, we would have to compare students of similar verbal ability in each of the programs. All that we lacked was a test.

Help came from an expected source. At an experimental reading for College Boards in the fall of 1969, I asked Fred I. Godshalk, former Chairman of the Humanities Division of Educational Testing Service, if he had any ideas. He had and was willing to cooperate. Our evaluation had begun.

After discussion among Department members, we decided to conduct our evaluation in three parts—or phases, as we chose to elegantly title them. Phase A, an objective evaluation, would require the help of professionals and would measure the writing and reading skills of juniors and seniors in both the Electives and Traditional program in late spring of 1970. Phase B, subjective, would quiz the participants in the Electives program by means of questionnaires. One questionnaire would be concerned with students still in high school; the second would go to graduates. Phase C, also subjective, would be a report from the teachers of Electives themselves.

By August, 1970 we had completed the major part of the Evaluation—all of Phase A and the student questionnaire of Phase B. With the graduates and the teachers yet to be formally quizzed and counted, the popularity of Electives English seems be justified.

The successful completion of the objective evaluation cost us the most time and money. At Mr. Godshalk's suggestion, we required every junior and senior in both Electives and Traditional English to write on two assignments. The first composition, written April 27, allowed the students twenty minutes to compose their answers to what was once a 20-minute composition topic for the English Composition test for CEEB:

> "The trouble with being open-minded is that your brains may fall out." How, when, and to what extent is open-mindedness a fault? Explain and illustrate from your reading, study, or observation.

The second composition, given May 4, allowed 45 minutes for the student to write on a topic once used by CEEB's writing sample once demanded by some colleges:

> "In the world of school and college students today, a 'fun-morality' appears to dominate, an anything-goes philosophy representing a degenerate form of what the Founding Fathers meant by 'the pursuit of happiness.'" To what extent and in what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Each topic had been chosen by a departmental committee from a wide selection of once secure topics generously lent us for the purpose by ETS.

A reading test was not so easy to come by. We finally formed a committee of six, each member agreeing to supply two passages with multiple choice questions, and made our own test. Once each committee member had taken all the tests and thus discovered the most blatant of the errors and ambiguities, we were able to come up with a test we felt would work. This was given to Mr. Godshalk, whose many years of test-making enabled him to weed out further items. The result was a 56-question test based upon the reading of seven short passages. As we hoped to test ability especially in the kind of reading done in English classes, four of the passages were prose—one each of literary criticism, informal exposition, formal exposition and narrative—two were of poetry and the seventh was dramatic narrative. Students who took the test early in June had 52 minutes to read and answer the questions.

For a mass-grading of the compositions, the most expensive part of the evaluation, we engaged Mr. Godshalk and Robert Jones, also of ETS, to supervise ten of our English teachers who were paid to work Saturday and Sunday, May 9 and 10, to read eight hours daily under close supervision. Applying the same standards used by ETS in grading CEEB 20-minute compositions and Advanced Placement answers, the ETS team soon had our teachers reading quickly and with precision. Students had been given code names to minimize the danger of unconscious prejudice, and each coded paper was read by two teachers, neither of whom knew how the other had rated it. Ratings were by the nine-point scale with 2 and 4 given to papers considered below average—in varying degrees of course—and 6 and 8 given to papers rated above average. The uneven numbers from one to nine were used to indicate degrees of difference so that, for example, the teacher seeing a paper as not quite 8 in caliber might rate it a 7 rather than a 6. Each paper, after two ratings from 1 to 9, would therefore have a total score ranging from 2 to 18; and each student, with two such papers, would then have a score ranging from 4 to 36.

Assisting this operation were three student aides who kept papers from being read twice by any at the same table, did the tallying of scores, and scrambled and unscrambled the code names. In the two days the ten teachers managed to read and rate more than a thousand compositions twice. The same teachers finished their duties in June by scoring, far more

quickly this time, the results of over 500 reading tests. The total cost involved for Phase A was about $1800.

With a drawer full of statistics, visions of all sorts of comparisons danced in our heads until we began to see the number of different groups we were working with. Some of our students had taken Electives two years, some had taken a year of Traditional and a year of Electives, some had taken Traditional two years, some had supplemented Traditional years by various quadrants of Electives, some had entered school within the two-year period and could not be compared. In addition, we would lose all students who had not taken all three tests. Finally, each student being compared would have to have in school files some test of verbal ability.

We finally decided, with the help of Bernard Joseph, the school psychologist, who now began his important part in the evaluation, that we had adequate numbers only in the eleventh grade, where we could compare 155 Electives students with 69 Traditional students of similar ability.

In his study Mr. Joseph performed a comparison of means to determine the answer to what was now our single question: Is there any evidence in comparing students of roughly the same verbal ability that those pursuing Electives learned more or less than those in Traditional English classes?

Mr. Joseph asked for a third criterion of results—scores on the 1970 New York State June English Comprehensive Regents, given in our school to all but remedial students at the end of their junior year—and began his work. For ranking in ability he used the School and College Ability Test—given to the group involved in October, 1968—and utilized the Verbal Stanine Rankings to equate the group for verbal ability. He then considered three ability groupings: Low (1, 2 or 3), Average (4, 5 or 6), and High (7, 8 and 9). For those able to interpret charts, his results follow.

Low Verbal Ability Group (SCAT Stanines 1-3)
(Number considered in all three tests: Electives 25; Traditional, 15)

RESULTS OF WRITING TEST

	Electives	*Traditional*
Mean	14.6	14.8
Stand. Dev.	3.3	3.5

Test of Sig.: None

RESULTS OF READING TEST

Mean	27.6	29.4
Stand. Dev.	6.8	6.4

Test of Sig.: None

RESULTS OF REGENTS

Mean	74.2	71.7
Stand. Dev.	7.7	10.7

Test of Sig.: 1.3 (Not significant at the 5% level of confidence)

Average Verbal Ability Group (SCAT Stanines 4-6)
(Number considered in all three tests: Electives, 100: Traditional, 40)

RESULTS OF WRITING TEST

	Electives	*Traditional*
Mean	18.2	18.8
Stand. Dev.	3.3	4.1

Test of Sig.: None

RESULTS OF READING TEST

Mean	34.9	32.8
Stand. Dev.	6.9	7.8

Test of Sig.: 1.5 (Not significant at the 5% level of confidence)

RESULTS OF REGENTS

Mean	81.4	82.3
Stand. Dev.	8.8	6.3

Test of Sig.: None

High Verbal Ability Group (SCAT Stanines 7-9)
(Number considered in all three tests: Electives, 30; Traditional, 14)

RESULTS OF WRITING TEST

	Electives	*Traditional*
Mean	20.2	21.9
Stand. Dev.	4.2	6.8

Test of Sig.: None

RESULTS OF READING TEST

Mean	41.6	41.7
Stand. Dev.	4.7	6.6

Test of Sig.: None

RESULTS OF REGENTS

Mean	87.7	88
Stand. Dev.	7.2	6.5

Test of Sig.: None

In what is perhaps more easily understandable, the results showed only two possible differences in the performances of those Scarsdalians educated by two different English programs. The two—in the performance of the low verbal ability group on Regents and of the average verbal ability group in reading—might, Mr. Joseph carefully noted, "constitute a trend toward a significant difference." The one thing we can now say with confidence about Electives is, "Yes, it is teaching at least as much as do traditional classes."

Such an answer, however, hardly justifies the increased time and bother that go into constructing courses and course catalogs every ten weeks. Why not, then, continue with traditional classes in which a student is machine-scheduled in September and from which he does not depart until June of the following year?

The answer to that was clearly revealed in the results from the questionnaires passed out to the Electives students during the final fortnight of school in June, 1970. The questionnaire in itself was formidable to contemplate: six typewritten pages containing 40 questions which demanded answers of checks, yes or no, or short responses. With less formal organization than the reading test, it had grown from 25 questions after being handed out to the department for consideration.

We hoped for frankness and, to get it, asked students not to sign their names and not to give the form to their teachers but to put it in a box located in the Department Center. And held our breaths. How many, after all, would turn in such a colossus during the final week of school without teacher goading? It turned out that 343 students would, 53 per cent of those enrolled in Electives. In addition, those who had taken projects involving no classes except faculty guidance—our Independent Study and Reading Unlimited courses (*English Journal:* February, 1970)—were asked to evaluate the success of those courses. Of those 64 per cent of the IS students and 38 per cent of the RU students responded.

Questions were designed with several purposes in mind. Some asked for answers that would allow us to compare the students' feelings toward Electives courses with their attitudes toward Traditional ones. Some asked for answers that would help us to correct what students might feel were deficiencies in the present program. Some called for answers that might give us a picture of student-teacher relationships. And some dealt specifically with the teaching of composition so that we might see how successfully we were dealing with what the department considers the most vital area of preparation in English skills.

This abstract can hardly present the material sent to the Board of Education in a 41-page report of the two evaluations, but some comparisons are worth the time. Questions 3 and 4 attempted to compare the feelings of students toward the two programs (All Electives students would have had Traditional courses in Grades 9 and 10) and to rate their Electives courses in general:

4. I would compare [my Electives choices] as follows with Traditional English courses I have taken.

My electives courses were	
much better	50%
somewhat better	22%
little different	17%
somewhat worse	7%
much worse	4%
Number answering	325

3. I would rate [the Electives courses I have taken] as follows:

Outstanding	23%
Very good	33%
Fair	25%
Occasionally poor	8%
Poor	10%
Can't remember	1%
Number answering	335

The answers to Question 5 turned up the one significant weakness in our Electives program—and in our traditional one and, I suspect, in the programs of almost every school in the country. "How would you," it asked, "compare your total experience in Electives with that in Traditional courses as such experience relates to the following skills?" Six skills followed: the ability to write with organization and fluency, the ability to read with comprehension, the ability to speak with organization and conviction, the ability to understand one another in discussions, the ability to connect several subject fields, and the ability to express one's self in fields other than reading, writing and speaking. Results are listed below.

In Electives	*Writing*	*Reading*	*Speaking*	*Discussing*	*Connecting*	*Other Media*
I learned more	38%	36%	29%	43%	62%	51%
No difference	38%	55%	64%	54%	32%	46%
I learned less	24%	9%	7%	3%	6%	3%
Number answered	334	334	334	334	334	334

The 24 percent in the "I learned less" in the composition column points out the one identifiable weakness. We had hoped to get some answers from Questions 23 and 24 about what constituted a good composition course. Question 23 asked: "Which of the following figures best represents the number of compositions, including essay tests, you wrote in that quadrant of Electives in which you learned *most* about composition? Question 24 repeated the question but used *least* to replace *most*. Answers are, at best, confusing.

Type of Writing	*Learned Most*	*Learned Least*
150-500 words weekly	23%	15%
150-500 words every other week	22%	11%
150-500 words three times a quadrant	19%	19%
Less than any above	2%	13%
3 longer papers	15%	7%
2 longer papers	9%	13%
1 long paper	5%	19%
Other	5%	9%

Nor were we any more fortunate when we came to short responses. Asked what would best improve the Electives program. 67 students answered "an improvement in the teaching of composition." Asked for suggestions for improvement, 23 simply said "make it better" or words to that effect. Others felt the research paper should not be a requirement for seniors, that there weren't enough creative writing courses, that there were too many creative writing courses, that we should teach more grammar ("I needed it for foreign language," five students wailed), vocabulary, add drill for College Boards, and teach writing "instead of Shakespeare and the Greeks."

We know more definitely from the questionnaire that students feel:

> It is no easier to get extra help from an Electives teacher (71%).
>
> They get better grades in Electives English (47%).
>
> The teacher is the most important in making a course good (91%) or poor (93%).
>
> They choose their courses from catalog titles and descriptions (62%) rather than from knowing who the teacher is (17%).
>
> The course descriptions in the catalog are fairly accurate (70%).
>
> More courses attempt too much (70% reported one or more courses in which material was not adequately covered) than too little (27%).
>
> On the whole, reading requirements are fair (75%).
>
> They do all (55%) or more than (22%) the required reading.
>
> The nine or ten-week quarter is adequate to get to know the teacher well, to learn a subject, and to get a fairly judged grade (70%).
>
> Their interests have widened (88%) and they have been more willing to work (90%).

We know also the titles of the courses the students have liked most, a rather impressive list; and a far shorter list of courses they feel should be abandoned. We have a page-long list of titles they would like to see added, the majority well worth considering, and all sorts of compliments and carefully worded criticisms.

As for the special projects involving independent work with a faculty adviser, 91% of those taking Independent Study reported that the project challenged them, produced what they thought were good results, and was interesting; 83% claimed they gave the project more time and work than they would to a

normal class; and 70% found the faculty sponsor "exactly right." The average number of words written on the final project of those responding was 4,000. Of those taking Reading Unlimited, 86% claimed they read more than they normally did in English classes, 48% claiming ten or more hours of reading per week for an average of eight books in a quarter's time; and 78% found their sponsor's guidance "exactly right" with an average of one class period per week spent privately with him, and with writing averaging 1100 words supplementing these discussions.

At about mid-year in the 1970-71 year we will send out a short questionnaire to our last year's Electives graduates, about 95% of whom have been accepted in colleges, in an effort to check on how helpful they now feel their final two years of English have been. And by the end of the present school year the 17 Electives-teaching members of our 24-teacher Department will have completed their appraisal of the Electives program. By June, 1971 the evaluation of three years of Electives English in Scarsdale High School will have been completed.

So far as one can predict, the results of the final evaluation will indicate that the new program has been successful and should be continued and expanded. The students themselves see it as a distinct improvement, offering course diversity and interest as the main benefits. Much of the department's fear that basic skills were being neglected to engender this diversity and interest should be dispelled by the statistical evidence that Electives students perform as well as do Traditional ones on every test of the basic skills. The one area in which we are demonstrably weak—but no more so than previously—is in the teaching of composition, and the means for bettering that instruction now occupy our department in many of its meetings.

We are well satisfied with the results of the evaluation. While we cannot claim that we have the panacea for doctoring the English ills of our students, we can, at least for a time, feel sure that we have sugarcoated the bitterness of the pill without simultaneously weakening its efficacy.