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ABSTRACT

This document describes the design and development of a structured elective program in English at Fayetteville-Manlius Senior High School. It provides a brief analysis of the events which caused the curriculum change, a description of the development of a modified version of the elective system, and a description of the course offerings in literature, writing, and reading available to the students in the new English program. The document concludes with the suggestion that developing an elective program depends on the department's credibility and budget. (RB)

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AVOIDING THE GRAB-BAG CURRICULUM:
AN ATTEMPT AT A STRUCTURED ELECTIVE PROGRAM

Speech delivered to National Council of Teachers of English,
Philadelphia, November 23, 1973, by Judith R. Gordon, Chairman, High
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Given: A department of fourteen experienced and conscientious English teachers discontented with the operation of the traditional program that they carefully built for five tracks of English, 10, 11, and 12; 1250 predominantly college-bound students from an upper-middle-class, upstate New York suburban community, occasionally wondering if school is really doing what it should for them; an administration struggling to cope with student apathy and unrest as manifested in underground student newspapers, rumors of walkouts and a general lack of student desire to attend study halls or some teachers' classes; and an American educational system berating itself especially vehemently in that Spring of 1971 for having too long ignored students.

Problem: What kinds of changes should be made in the English offerings to the students of Fayetteville-Manlius Senior High School?

Some background on what happened in the English Department during the school year of 1970-71 is necessary for one to understand what caused the teachers to desire radical change and what enabled them to agree on several basic assumptions and directions (for agreement among English teachers is a rare commodity). In the Fall of 1970 the department chairman had instituted as a stopgap measure to ease student and teacher dissatisfaction, a program of mini-electives, whereby Monday, Wednesday and Friday students went to their regular English courses and Tuesday and Thursday they attended mini-electives. Although students, teachers and administrators alike praised the opportunities for students to have a choice in the courses they attended, and although teachers enjoyed the opportunity to present specific subjects utilizing their interests and expertise, the program was unsuccessful for several reasons: too many students did not get their first or second or even third choice in the limited number of seven or eight options their particular

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English period offered; teachers, who had been told of the new plan on the first day of school, had to scramble to prepare their mini-courses. At no point in the year did teachers have time to sit down and discuss which two-fifths of their regular courses they should drop. And even though the list of mini-courses was developed in the best liberal fashion and bore titles which teachers volunteered and students suggested and voted on, everyone felt a certain lack of structure and balance. The process of asking students for their suggestions and evaluations and letting them choose whatever they thought they might like revealed to us that we and others had not done a good job of making students aware of the learning process, of their own goals and abilities, or of the potentials of an English curriculum. In short, we were acutely aware of our problems. At the same time, we became conscious of ourselves as the only trained experts who knew both our students and the subject of English.

As long as we could devise one to suit our needs, an elective program sounded exciting and daring. We were clear that we wanted to maximize the opportunities for teachers to teach their strengths and for students to make choices beneficial to their own individual needs, but that we wanted a more structured and developmental program than the minis offered. We knew that we did not wish to return to the straight old English 10-11-12 system, which tended to isolate each teacher in his room with a copy of the curriculum and his favorite books to cover. Though we appreciated the freedom this system offered the teacher, we saw that its results were not entirely positive. And we also knew that English 10, 11 and 12 were seen now by students as just further installments of the same old English they'd been forced to go to every day since Kindergarten. On the other hand, in constructing our alternative to both tradition and minis we did not feel we could abdicate our responsibility as teachers by adopting the fashionable approach we heard other schools touting, the easy out whereby students suggested courses like Science Fiction Tales or Stories of Camping and teachers who eschewed the popular approach contributed options like Seminar in Joyce so that they could have 8-10 top students read and discuss the way they do in graduate school. Not for us sending the students to the gym every six or ten weeks to sign up for whatever looked most attractive this time and rotating the alphabet in the hope that everyone would get his first choice once at least. Accordingly, we boldly developed our program ourselves and modified it as we went, without outside professional help of any kind other than our reading of APEX, ERIC and other individual school elective program descriptions. Every member of the department participated; students and parents contributed their ideas; administrators gave us their blessing.

First, in describing our program, a look at the length of our new courses. Our system of four marking periods per year allows us to offer some courses approximately ten-weeks in length and others (more ambitious in scope) a full semester long. The typical pattern of course blocks which results for the student is fairly definite although he has a number of alternatives in which courses he takes. The incoming sophomore usually takes four quarter-length courses, including a speech course and a writing course at his level. A junior begins the year with a semester reading course, usually one of several courses in American literature, but something else if he and his teachers feel he is not ready for his American Literature course yet; then in the second semester a junior usually takes a ten-week writing course and a ten-week reading course. A senior usually takes a semester course followed by a ten-week reading course and a ten-week writing course. Such a pattern to the scheduling allows us to decide on which skills should be taught where and then to fit them in identifiable places. Students seem to like having an established pattern to follow in their own ways, for it helps keep them from becoming confused by a plethora of choices. Students also appreciate that the teachers care enough to provide each student with individual guidance at registration time. Moreover, the presence of a sense of structure in the program reassures the student that the department has a stake in his orderly and efficient development and that English is not just a grab-bag of miscellaneous topics.

Since different types of courses have just been alluded to, a more specific mention of some of the courses the department offers seems called for. First a word about the way we classify our various courses. Because we felt that under the old English 10-11-12 system writing was sometimes neglected and speech usually forgotten, we formally divided courses into categories of written communication, spoken communication and reading as a matter of convenience in assuring that various skills would not be short-changed. It is important to note, however, that this division into areas describes only the emphasis of each course, and that each course includes writing, speaking, listening and reading activities. Moreover, each area is seen as an integral part of the communication process, which we feel constitutes the subject territory traditionally called English.

Among the reading courses, as already mentioned, the department offers several American Literature courses. These courses are not designed as first and second installments in a survey, and the student is expected to take only one of them. The student may select his American Literature course from offerings at different levels of difficulty; on his particular level he may also have a choice based on a course's manner of organization (thematic versus historical) and the particular works each course offers. The student not ready for either level of American Literature in his junior year may take a course titled the Forseeable Future, postponing American Literature until his senior year; or he may take two quarters of basic reading and writing courses before finishing his junior year with American Literature I.

In contrast to completely non-graded elective systems where students of all grades and ages may take a given course, our courses generally do not mix sophomores with upperclassmen. Our first semester courses often keep junior and seniors separate from each other as well. We do have some courses, however, which provide an opportunity for juniors and seniors of particular ability to mix. Usually this is the case in the ten-week courses offered second semester. In the category of ten-week reading or literature courses, some are organized by genre and stress improvement in reading through knowledge of structure and conventions of particular forms: Modern Novel, Poetry Today, Short Prose, Comedy, and Good Movie--Better Book. Many are thematically organized and provide wide reading from all genres and opportunity for students to discover a variety of ways an author establishes his attitude and approach to his topic: Literature of Social Criticism; Man and War; Man and the State; Three Views of the Human Condition; and God, Man and the Devil. Others fall into less easily classifiable categories: Modern Theories of Communication and Famous Works of European Culture. Our courses originated in many ways over the three years--from successful units or nimi-courses in our former programs to adaptations of materials we came across in ERIC and APEX. Although we are vitally aware that each course must be able to appeal to students on the grounds of interest, we have not been so intimidated by the need to sell each course that we pander to student interest by offering mostly Twentieth Century works: instead we now advertise and teach Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Ibsen, Dostoyevsky and the Bible more than we ever have before.

Now the matter of writing courses. We fully realize that a ten-week writing course is not likely to turn on either teacher or student and our austere titles of these courses are an acknowledgement of this. Nevertheless, many teachers actually become inspired at the prospect of teaching two or three sections of General Skills and Review or The Essay several times a year and their commitment is strong enough that they not only assign and grade all those papers but they insist that our writing-course-every-year requirement be kept. Moreover, instead of balking at taking Prose Style or Writing Workshop, most students acknowledge their need to improve their writing and look forward to an intensive session; some students even sign up for an extra writing course and not necessarily just Creative Writing I or II. Our sequence of courses is visually presented in a flow-chart, which with our course descriptions and teacher quidance we hope helps the student to recognize the developmental nature of the program, to analyze his own needs and abilities and to understand that, as with the rest of the program, the harder he works in a given course, the greater the number and attractiveness of the alternatives he will be able to choose among the next time. In this way, then, as well as in others throughout the program, we try to develop the student's awareness of his strengths and weaknesses in English, of the ways in which various courses might help him and of the learning process in general. Our registration materials include statements of our various policies as well as the philosophy behind them.

Our most basic belief guiding the creation of our new program is that our job as a high school English department is not to train experts in particular specialized areas of our subject: we are not producing actors or novelists or literary critics or political propagandists. Perhaps experiences a student has in high school English will spark an interest in such a vocation, but our task is to develop as many of each student's potential interests as possible while equipping him with as full an array of skills in communication as possible. Thus, we are concerned to do the most intensive job we can of improving student reading, writing, speaking and listening at the same time that we protect each student against overspecializing in a particular area of English at the expense of other areas.

One strategy we use to insure that a student does not slight any important area of his preparation in English is to stipulate that before graduating a student must fulfill three departmental requirements. As part of his three state-mandated years of English, a student at FM Senior High must take at least one ten-week writing course each year, and must complete at some time a ten-week course in speech and a semester of American Literature. Each requirement can be fulfilled in several ways and at different places in the student's yearly schedule.

Another way we avoid overspecialization is to refuse to offer any course in a single author, even in Shakespeare. Yet we do not see survey courses as a desirable method of providing a student with breadth. For that we rely on his taking courses organized in different ways--by skill, theme, genre, etc. Even our American and British Literature courses are intended to teach reading; they do not purport to be college-type surveys. One of the first things teachers saw was that in a ten or twenty week course, we could not teach all the good literature in the book. Whenever we begin to whiz along covering many works efficiently, we suspect ourselves of self-deception, of not looking too closely into the mind of the student to see if we really have dispelled some of the false assumptions and approaches he brings to the study of English, of conning ourselves by asking questions to which the student can successfully guess the answers. For the FM High School student has achieved a kind of sophistication by age fifteen, one which should serve him well, Future Shock notwithstanding: previous experience in school and out has equipped the FM student to discuss convincingly chapter 14 of A Separate Peace when he has only read to chapter 9. In short, he can BS convincingly on any topic if only he can have a minute or two to monitor the discussion first. The teacher in a hurry to cover the book ignores that something important is missing in the student's basic approach to a poem when this student reveals that he thinks Shakespeare's sonnet beginning "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" is addressed to a tree. This is more than a wrong answer to be corrected by having someone give the right answer. We try to teach our students to be aware of a work's literal level before they speculate on its implications and to consider the advantages an author gains by assuming a particular speaking voice. Such matters as these we see as more important than teaching the really significant poetry and prose of England or America or the World. Going through the motions of a college-type course, be it a survey or on a particular author, is renege on the high school's responsibility for teaching something deeper and more basic that a student should have before he reaches college-something he should have even if he doesn"t go at all.

Thus, as you can see, changing to an elective system served to remind us anew what we were really up to, and the decisions which we continue to need to make as we implement our program help us keep alive that sometimes evanescent awareness of our real purposes. Although I cannot claim that our new approach caused our teachers to revolutionize overnight their teaching methods, the scrutiny we gave our goals and the help and support we freely gave each other is resulting in a new interest im improving our teaching and a new warmth and caring about each other. We are gradually beginning to fulfill in the classroom the opportunities for individualized instruction our new program alerted us to. I have a feeling this may be what makes it all worth the huge effort, perhaps even more than the positive student attitudes generated and more than the many specific advantages we gained, only a few of which I have touched on. One advantage is the entire system of new courses designed for our non-college students and for that small group of students with extreme reading and writing problems. The time limit on this speech precludes an explanation of such courses as Victims of Circumstance and Developing Reading Potential, developed and taught by our reading teacher, who has become an active classroom-teaching member of our department, increasing the number of students she is able to help and lightening our class loads as well. Nor can I describe the course for our twenty-five very weakest entering sophomores, a course team-taught by the reading teacher and one of our strongest regular department members. Additional information on the details of our program is available in our registration materials, a copy of which you can obtain by writing to the address given in the back of George Hillocks' book, Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs. We are sorry to need to request you enclose three dollars to cover our secretarial, postage and paper expenses.

In conclusion, like Amy Lowell, our problem has been to extricate ourselves from the restrictive patterns of the past, yet we wish to avoid the chaos or emptiness that characterizes absolute freedom. I am aware that I have not mentioned our solutions to the problems we faced in the more practical dimension of building an elective program. I suspect you are already familiar with the problems from experience or from reading Hillocks' book, pamphlets such as Douglas Brown's

Alternatives in English: Building Elective Programs distributed by Addison-Wesley Publishers, or other references on electives. Moreover, the details of our registration process and our utilization of the BOCES Socrates computer program in scheduling may be of no use at all to your situation; the program of keeping course descriptions congruent with what actually happens in the course itself your staff must tackle in its own way; and the effectiveness of the case you make to your principal on getting money for all the new books an elective program needs depends on your department's credibility versus your budget crunch.

I'd like to think that my mention of some of the philosophical underpinnings of our program has raised a few of the deeper issues involved in building an English elective program. But what really made me accept the scary invitation to speak here today was the hope of getting your reactions to our approach and your suggestions for improvement. For the past three years, with lots of curriculum work to do and without money in the budget for consultants or conferences like NCTE, our chances to assess our strengths and weaknesses relative to the achievements of other schools has been severely limited, and we're eager to hear the reactions of our professional peers. In spite of remaining problems, we feel our program is sensible and responsible, qualities which have contributed to instead of detracted from its popularity with students and parents and teachers. Best of all, it seems to be working.