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ABSTRACT

To be effective, elective English must be more than reading new literature and discarding the old. Instead, it should include reading the old and the new, and sharing these experiences through discussion and writing. It should also include looking and listening at films, tapes, and records to analyze what has been seen and heard. Before deciding to offer English as an elective, teachers should decide why they want it as an elective and offer a rationale for it. The elective program can meet the needs and interests of a multi-ability and multi-character school, and provide a variety of opportunities to use books and media to teach the English language. Teachers should establish a philosophy for the elective program to determine its structure and goals and should then work to reach these goals. Elective programs must incorporate new and invigorating teaching methods which aim at getting students involved. (SW)

ELECTIVE ENGLISH - A NEW LOOK

Adele H. Stern

Add another revolution to your list. Less bloody perhaps than the myriad social revolutions we have been experiencing in the last twenty years, but revolution nevertheless with sweat and tears and barricades of its own. The revolution in the English curriculum. And we can blame it all on Sputnik. Until then, all was peaceful and paced and progressively chronological in the English classroom. We clutched our anthologies and grammar texts to our breasts and covered the content with nary a question of the inherent virtue of our march from page 1 to page 585 in ten easy months. Once in awhile some radical teacher brought in a novel written after 1919 and took his professional life in his hands. Or, there might be a nagging suspicion that the rules so securely mandated in that respectable grammar-composition text did not fit the nature or structure of the English language as it was spoken or written. (I can remember my own Herzog-like letters to John Warriner, written in frustration and unmailed, each time a student asked me a question I couldn't answer with Warriner's rules.) But these were rare times. For the most part, we knew we were on the side of God. We were elevating taste, developing minds and re-immortalizing Shakespeare year after year. By all means, there were ripples on the peace from time to time. Sigmund Freud had an effect, and we approached literature for a time from the point of view of the amateur psychoanalyst. Then there was the life-adjustment period, and we tackled the masters in terms of how well they could help us to get along with our families and friends. For a short period, something called the Core Curriculum made a stir, and English became the handmaiden to the social sciences. But none of these movements shook us up as did the advent of Sputnik.

For that brought considerable attention to the sciences and mathematics, and the English language arts people weren't going to be left out of the party. Besides, in the United States, the federal government was holding out the bait of money, and that was too much for even the most aesthetically pure purveyor of belletristic writing. We were determined to get part of that golden bundle, even if we had to change ourselves into a science. Enter Linguistics, the Commission on English, the various Projects English, the redefinition of English into the tripod of Language, Literature and Composition, and the National Defense Education Act. Yes, in order to be funded we had to prove we were part of the National Defense, and maybe we were. Maybe the best sort of defense against the holocaust is a civilization of living, thinking, compassionate, literate men and women fully aware of the sensitivity of communication and of the power of language. In any case, I remember feeling rather strange when I read about the Congress arguing in those early NDEA times that Reading could be funded because heaven knows where those writers would lead us. I could never quite understand that dichotomy any more than I can understand the current thinking in some circles that Reading is one subject and English is another....but then, that's another matter and another speech.

Nevertheless, the 1960's brought in a revolution to our discipline which, while it elicited little newspaper coverage, compared to some other things that were happening, caused some dramatic changes of its own. We began the trek to summer institutes; we talked about articulation K-12; we learned a new vocabulary-transforms, verbids, tagmemics, sector analysis, clusters.

At the same time, there was a strong movement again toward integrated curriculum, and Humanities courses which meshed the traditional liberal arts subjects: Social Studies, English, Music, Art proliferated in many secondary

schools. But before, the Humanities Programs and the newly defined Projects English curricula could get a strong foothold, another phenomenon was developing. The English teachers themselves were taking the curriculum into their own hands: They were declaring: We want to determine what we want to teach. We don't want the publishers telling us. We don't want mandated curriculum from some central office. We want to write and develop our own courses which will meet the needs and interests of our students, which will help them in their day-to-day activities now and will build interests and ideas for the rest of their lives.

Moreover, the teachers were insisting: We can't ignore the society in which we live. We can no longer be Renaissance men; there is just too much knowledge around for us to know it all. Anyway, Alvin Toffler tells us: Knowledge has grown increasingly perishable. We have to find out ourselves and show our students how to grow and develop within the rapidly changing world, so that the shock of rapid change to their systems is minimized.

We simply cannot ignore the electronic media and the sophistication, therefore, of our students, to what the world is like. We have to recognize the masses and masses of inexpenisvely produced books which have flooded the world, some of them far more exciting and interesting than the traditional textbook, some of them far more dull. But here, nevertheless, and creating new thoughts about the development and implementation of curriculum. (It may interest you to know that it is estimated that while the number of books published has doubled every twenty years since 1450 and some 30 million have by now been published. The projected figure is 60 million by 1980.) Less than seven years from now.

Besides, some of you may remember that we were having our consciousness raised by our students in the 1960's, who were pushing to make their voices heard and their choices real. English teachers responded, Elective Programs were born, wherein secondary school students could choose from a large, or not so large,

variety of courses of many kinds. There was attention to the media, to the current literature, to the nature of the English language, to ethnic literatures. There were courses which were designed to catch the imaginations of the uncatchable and those for the major elite. Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, we had no limits: We were free to go where we wished and to be what we were.

It was glorious. We could go to a summer course in the university and teach the same course to our students in the fall. We became as familiar with the film catalogue as we had once been with the anthology.

We raced to unpack the deliciously various paperbacks as the cartons arrived. And, once more, as we had done when first out of college, we were frequently one chapter ahead of the students in the current texts. Some schools did away with the classics entirely. Others discarded all attention to language study. The nature of composition study was modified from discipline to catharsis in many schools.

The program became as varied as the differences among school communities. In one school, using the phasing structure, students were assigned to classes according to their ability. Some schools developed the elective programs all through the grades from 9-12; others started with 12 then add 11. Some other schools have had two programs; one for 9th and 10th years and another for 11 and 12.

Teachers, used to having mandated classes and captive audiences, assigned arbitrarily, worried about the students' choices. What if nobody chose their classes! What if their reputations as tough teachers or their disagreement with the guidance counselor would leave them with empty classrooms! So, they made a bid for popularity and advertised their courses.

And kids were telling us how much they liked English now. And sometimes

they were saying that they didn't have to take English now. They could take Film Study instead, or Creative Writing, or Science Fiction, or Midnight Literature. English was dead. Hurrah!

Or was it? Maybe we just hadn't communicated well enough. We teachers of the language, had not used that language clearly enough to clarify to the students that English has a lot to do with speaking the language and writing it and with reading the literature written in that language and translated into it. That English class must be concerned with the tradition of literature, with the expression of literature to create and recreate images of man in a variety of histories and experiences. That English class could give students the power of language which would help them broaden their lives and intensify their experiences.

In our eagerness to drop the shackles of a stilted, rigid curriculum, we had dropped our discipline too. In our eagerness to give the students choices, we had failed to expose them to what we knew and still know to be the greatest thoughts of all time. In our desire to recognize the impact of the media, we had failed to train ourselves to know and understand the language and structure of the media itself.

English class is not day after day rapping, although discussion both directed and non-directive is part of the universe of discourse. English is not sensitivity training in a creative writing class although understanding one's own motivations does help in the creative process. English is not looking at films one after another and reacting with "Wow" or "Super" or just a glazed look in the eye.

English is reading: reading reading reading...the old and the new: Electra and Antigone and I Never Promised You a Rose Garden and Invisible Man and the

Poetry of Rock. And sharing what you have read both in discussion and writing. English is writing: writing, writing, writing...maybe everyday, formal and informal, structured and unstructured. writing for your own remembrances and writing for someone else to read. And English is speaking, trying to convince someone of your point of view, describing an experience with your voice and words and gestures so that someone else can empathize with your experience, dramatizing a scene, saying a poem. English is speaking.

English is also looking and listening: at films and tapes and records and internalizing but also analyzing what one has seen and heard. Why that last scene in Four Hundred Blows is unforgetable. The pathos of the death of the seagull in The End of One. The voice of Marlon Brando in the Julius Caesar record. English is looking and listening.

English is a discipline. And like any discipline, it has a content, and it requires work. The content is large and varied and that is one of the reasons there is so much work for teachers who choose to teach in an elective program. But before one makes a decision to break the curriculum into electives: eight weeks or ten weeks or a semester long, the teachers have to decide why they are doing this. George Hillocks in his book Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs states that of the seventy-six programs he examined, only twenty-five presented any sort of rationale for the elective program as a whole. I daresay most schools that participated in this revolution did so out of disenchantment with the year-long, chronological curriculum, a bid for attention from the community, or a desire to jump on the bandwagon, all understandable but not particularly valid reasons. Much better it is to decide that the elective program fits the needs and interests of a

multi-ability and multi-character school, that it provides a variety of opportunies to use books and media to teach the English language, that it forces curriculum to change from old molds, makes teachers re-think their jobs, that it offers students opportunities to participate in curriculum choice.

Much better it is to work out a philsophy for the program, to determine a structure and its goals and then to work to reach these goals.

Let me describe to you the program I'm most familiar with. In this school, we started with allowing the Seniors to have electives and then added Juniors in a non-graded pattern the second year. We decided we didn't want any phasing or grouping except that which came naturally. So we didn't label the courses in any fashions (We had no phase I, phase II, phase III classes as do some schools). We simply wrote clear descriptions of the courses which might indicate that they were challenging, or remedial, or interesting to anyone, and then we let the students choose, with as much counseling and advice as we and the guidance people could give.

We believed that it would be conceivable that a student who was limited in his language arts skills might take a (remedial) Communications course one semester in which all of his classmates were having difficulties similar to his, but the next semester he might take Mass Media or Film, for example, where there were students of many abilities and [illegible] Furthermore, we said, that all courses, no matter what the title, would contain literature and composition and great attention would be paid to the uses and functions of language.

For example, a novel course or a dramatic literature course would have students writing exposition on the literature read as well as imitative pieces of imaginative writing. A composition course would also have a certain amount of literature as basis for writing assignments and as examples of various forms.

Ginn's Unit Lessons in Composition provided many examples of forms of writing. But students also read plays and poetry and novels in the writing classes.

Because we were a little nervous about the amounts and kinds of writing, we advertised, in our descriptions of courses which the students received, just what they might expect to have to do if they took a particular course. (Incidentally, some students helped in the writing of course descriptions.) There was another reason too, that we advertised writing assignments. It was a reminder to ourselves that we had to give the customer his money's worth.

(It's so easy to become involved in the literature that one may forget the writing assignments.) We also said that all courses would pay some attention to the media. Indeed, although the Mass Media course was one of the most popular, we used the video-tape, records, reel-to-reel and cassette tapes as well as film, in every classroom, and that was an intrinsic part of all curriculum.

We made sure that in the Mass Media and Film class, students had many opportunities to write and express their opinions on what they had viewed as well as do library research into the various technical aspects of the medium they were studying.

We grew to believe, after much brain storming and exchanging of ideas, that speaking - oral discourse was the best motivation for writing, and many of us followed the philosophy Jim Moffett expresses in Teaching the Universe of Discourse, and started our classes with monologues, duologues, dialogues into plays and then exposition.

We believed with John Holt that "A writer needs a strong sense, awareness, not just of himself, but also of his listeners, readers. It follows from this, that no one can write well who has not learned, and many times, what it is like to talk long and seriously to a trusted friend (or friends) about things.

interesting to both of them."

We devised our courses so that a variety of genre could be used and a variety of authors in each course. For example, a course in Satire might include the study of Swift, Twain and Russell Baker, all brilliant technicians in the use of the English language, all enormously strong critics of their societies.

A course in Science Fiction could run the gamut of H.G. Wells, Heinlein, Azimov, Bradbury, Clarke.

Poetry can certainly encompass Shakespeare as well as Rod McKuen and Leonard Cohen. (If I may be so bold as to mention them in the same breath.) All of these poets use language, their metier, to express human desire and fear and thought and action.

Another course, thematically organized investigated the nature of the Human condition through the agony of Medea, Emma Bovary, as well as through the experiences of Claude Brown or Herman Hesse. What I'm saying is that we recognized the current literature and the students interests as worthy as concern just as we respected and admired the giants of the past.

We have a tendency in our august professionalism to consider that what is present is transient, perhaps even dangerous or in bad taste.

But what has weathered the test of time as the only literature of value. I always remember what a stir Walt Whitman caused with his first edition of Leaves of Grass which had to be printed in a phrenological depot. No respectable printer would touch him with a ten foot pole. And, of course, you remember the support he received from Emerson and Thoreau.

My own mother, a delightful, very Victorian lady, thought that all novels were obscene and was sure I would come to a bad end if I continued to read them.

I did continue...voraciously for years and years, with novels hidden in my economics and political science texts and under the blankets at night using a flashlight...and of course...I became an English teacher...a bad end indeed.

Probably because there had been an ongoing Humanities program in this school I've been telling you about, the teachers decided that they would bring into the English class, as it was appropriate, any of the Humanities disciplines which would fit what they might be studying. So, they had lectures from the art and the music department as well as field trips to museums and theatres. The students taking Asian Literature learned the manners and customs of the Far East...the tea ceremonies of Japan, the Noh and Kabuki theatre as they read and wrote about the literature they were studying. The Bible as Literature class used a variety of ministers as consultants for various interpretations of sections of the Bible. They heard and studied liturgical music and viewed the masters of painting and sculpture who treated the Biblical subjects they were learning about. Many of the individual projects in the variety of courses were investigations into disciplines other than English. But the core of the curriculum always emphasized the English language and its uses.

Some schools still offer the students the option of taking the traditional course if they don't want to participate in the elective program. A good indication of the success of the electives is in the number of students who revert to the traditional English or the growth of registration in the electives. I have a healthy respect for the pragmatism of the young. They'll choose the most interesting course, the one most valuable to them, not the one that's a waste of time.

Before I conolude I want to say something about instructional procedure,

teaching strategies, and something about what school is all about.

Maybe the elective programs are not the apogee of all English curriculum reform. Certainly there have always been excellent teachers who use the traditional curriculum in exciting ways evoking true and honest response to literature, who were loving and kind and interesting and interested...who made their classes places where students wanted to go to be excited and challenged and stretched. There are teachers who can lecture beautifully and instruct and entertain. But that is only one mode of teaching.

So, in taking a good look at the curriculum, in our shaking up of the past, we must also take a fresh look at some of our teaching methods. We know that true learning comes only when there is involvement. We have the responsibility of involving our students, not only in choices of courses but in content and progress. We can no longer be transfusers of information. We are now more facilitators. Our book orders change. Everyone in the class is not reading the same book. The old classroom collections of thirty or more copies might be used only for touchstone purposes...to teach a poem or to read an essay that we might need for a point of departure for a discussion.

Instruction may be individualized in many ways. Learning packets help a student clarify a skill, develop a concept for himself.

A teacher might bring into the classroom five or ten copies of ten or more novels. Students choose a novel from the group. They read it...in class... and at home. They might form groups to discuss a mutually read novel and to complete a series of assignments of their own devising or the teacher's. They might write their own study guides or produce a dramatization or interpretation for the class which might be performed alone or in teams or in a group. All students would have the opportunity to share the novel with other members of the class. Then novels could be exchanged and new groups formed.

What would the teacher be doing? He might be going around to the various groups to help in the discussion or to learn about a novel he had never read. He might take it home then and read it and join the discussion of the novel with the student group. Or he might direct the students to some literary criticism or some other novel be the same author.

Student discussions can lead to arguments which may evolve into written composition more exciting than any previously assigned, which certainly takes some of the tedium out of the teachers' reading of papers. Nor does the teacher have to read all of the papers. Other students may discuss and criticize their fellow students' writing. And some papers should be personal and private: a diary perhaps. But the teacher should read many of the papers and be ready to confer and offer suggestions.

In elective programs, it is easy to team teach. Invited teachers might take a class for a day or a week and the favor returned by the inviting teacher. Classes can be broken up into smaller units with some students going to the library or a resource center or out on a school investigation assignment. Then the teacher might work with the ten or so left on a particular assignment.

Of course, some schools have rules about noise and kids in the corridors and how many we can send to the library. But there are rules we like and rules we don't like, and if we find a good educational reason to modify rules, we fight to do this.

I believe in elective English, but I too worry that if we cop out on teaching the English language skills, there will be no more elective programs and maybe no more English as we want it at all. And I suggest that while we fight for this alteration in the curriculum, we talk to ourselves constantly about what English is supposed to be and that we communicate that information

loudly and clearly in our best English to the fathers of education in the community. And then we'll have the chance to send out of our schools the most literate humanists the world has ever known. That is our charge.

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