DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 636 CS 202 722

AUTHOR Berkowitz, Mildred D.
TITLE A Basics View of Censorship.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, Massachusetts, April 2-4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Censorship; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Secondary Education; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper defines censorship as the "removal of any information considered secret" and argues that the ambivalence among English Teachers concerning what should be taught leaves students unevenly educated and unable to see the relationship between courses in the English classroom and the survival skills necessary for the "real world" they are soon to encounter. Interdisciplinary teaching is one positive response to the state of skills proficiency found in secondary students today. Instructors must teach with sensitivity and wisdom the nuances and subleties which go with the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. (TS)

Mildred D. Berkowitz
Delivered at NCTE Nat'l. Sec. Conf.
Boston, Massachusetts
April 4, 1976

A BASICS VIEW OF CENSORSHIP

When I was asked to speak for Doublespeak at this NCTE convention, I was delighted. Boston -- basics -- "Back to Basics in 1976" -- sounded just for me. Even those of us English teachers who have replaced the conventional English textbooks, workbooks, and weekly themes with creative dramatics, group dynamics, and transformational grammar, should by now, early April 1976, be well into a firm program of basic skills in the language arts. That is, if we've been smart and have assumed the unlikely position of having our noses to the grindstone and our ears to the ground simultaneously. And, as most of my colleagues, and all of my students say, "between you and I ... " (sic) that's not easy. I planned to set the background to this discussion of the teaching about Doublespeak by first, talking about the secondary student and the present state of his competency in the skills of the language arts; second, to share with you my views on standards for qualifications and certification of teachers of English; and finally, to make an impassioned plea for the acceptance and implementation of interdisciplinary teaching; for total cooperation among the disciplines in an all-out effort to help our students become canny consumers, straight thinkers, and critical readers and listeners of marketplace, advertising, and political rhetoric.

Then the program came, and I discovered that I was billed with Mr. Soules under the umbrella topic: "Censorship and the Spirit of '76." I tried to think how my outline could be made to fit the publicized topic. I even talked eruditely of Procrustean beds -- but I was just showing off. Then it dawned on me that the topic of censorship is really adaptable to

the three points I hope to develop. If I choose (from the American Heritage Dictionary) to consider censorship, not prohibition, but the "removal of any information considered secret ...," then I can talk about: 1) a self-imposed censorship, and 2) an inverse kind of censorship imposed by a group or groups. Let me show you what I mean.

By now we are all aware, as English teachers, of the pitched battle being waged in the media against teachers generally, and our discipline particularly. Johnny can't read, write, spell, punctuate, capitalize, construct a sentence, or think -- and we're to blame, they say. When we finally made the cover of a national news magazine, Newsweek, it was not as nominees for Men and Women of the Year, as Time Magazine does, but because "Johnny Can't Write" (2) and they told the ready-to-believe public why. Yet are they completely wrong? There is enough literature to support the indictment that high school students are receiving diplomas and they can't read, and that these same high school students may go through an entire secondary experience without ever having to write an original composition or a solid piece of well-structured expository writing. Certainly, only a very few are ever asked to refine their speech habits, or even to speak audibly and intelligibly in a classroom. I was particularly struck by two statements in the Newsweek article. One spoke of the " ... students' inability to organize their thoughts clearly;" the other puts it that " ... even the brightest students are seriously deficient when it comes to organizing their thoughts ... one cause is inadequate grounding in the basics of syntax, structure, and style."

And here is one place where I think self-imposed censorship has prevailed. On the one hand, some of us have been so intimidated by the "let-it-all-hang-out, do-your-own-thing" school that we have joyously tossed out all the grammar and spelling books in favor of what is

euphemistically called "creative writing;" clarity of diction and precision and grace in the spoken word is sacrificed in favor of the "Student's Right to His Own Language"; and small-group reading conferences are replaced by "class meetings"and "magic circles" so we can all get to "know ourselves" and find out "who we are." This is the "tell-it-like-it-is" school. Yet Newsweek notes that, like it or not, "standard English is in fact the language of American law, politics, commerce, and the vast bulk of American literature -- to deny children access to it is in itself a pernicious form of oppression." That's one kind of censorship. On the other hand, the traditional grammarians (the sentence diagrammers, the verb conjugators, the twenty-words-a weekers) look with scorn on the structural linguists and transformational grammarians (the proponents of language histroy, the spoken word comes first, and the branching tree diagrams). Each censors the other out of existence, narrow-mindedly refusing to acknowledge what is best in both. I once had an English professor who remarked: "Show me a man with an open mind and I'll show you a man with a hole in his head." I fear we have more "hole-y" heads than open minds as we impose censorship upon each other.

This ambivalence toward what should be taught leaves us with students unevenly educated, placing little value on any knowledge of the history and structure of their native tongue, and unable to see the relationship between courses in the English classroom and the survival skills necessary for the "real world" they are soon to encounter. We have all read the articles in newspapers and magazines which tell us that colleges are spending more and more time on remedial reading and writing courses, that publishers have had to scale down the reading level of the textbooks because the college freshmen can't read them, and that scores in achievement

tests have dropped alarmingly in the past few years. I don't know what level you teach, but I, for one, at the junior high level, am appalled at what my students in a fairly affluent suburban community are producing in written and spoken material. I came across a term the other day that could apply to many students: "literate non-readers." They can read, but they don't know what they're reading. Now, although among ourselves in the profession we are convinced that the teachers below us haven't taught anything, we close ranks (as do other professions) in self-imposed censorship and shut our eyes and minds to the need for the self-examination which is long overdue.

We come to my second point: what should be the standards of qualification for the certification of would-be English teachers? And here is where our own cozy kind of censorship is allowed free reign. We suspect, nay, it is written, that the curriculum for the preparation of English teachers by the teachers' colleges needs a thorough revamping. This is a condition of long standing. Yet, again we close ranks in self-imposed censorship, not making the waves necessary to cause change. This same Newsweek article accuse us in this fashion: "English teachers themselves don't know how to write. NCTE in a survey found candidates for high school English teaching can go through high school, college, and advanced education degrees without taking a single course in English composition." Newsweek also cites another study in a mid-Southern state which horrified school officials when it was discovered that "half the teachers applying for English teaching jobs fail a basic test of grammar, punctuation, and spelling." I feel that no one should teach secondary English who does not have the following: B or better over-all academic record; the ability to pass maximum standard evaluations in oral and written language; thorough

grounding in the history and structure of the language; at least one course in teaching reading at the secondary level; and a continuing love affair with words and the English language. What is more usual to find in secondary English departments is: 1) nor particular academic achievement required for certification; 2) although from grades 6-12, the Englsih teacher is presumed to coach and improve the spoken language, the training and competence the teachers themselves have in this area is minimal; and 3) few, if any, have had courses in reading, yet are supposed to be equipped to handle diversified groups of various abilities running a gamut of reading problems.

Which brings me to a point in the teaching about Doublespeak where I must disagree with one of my coauthors in the new book Teaching About Doublespeak (1). I think that the teaching of what used to be termed "rhetoric" is vital. Unless students know the anatomy of propaganda, unless they are aware of the ways in which language can be used and misused, they will be sitting ducks for the demagogues and advertising brainwashers and their decoys. We have, of course, one serious problem which is difficult to overcome. Somehow we regard it as sort of un-American, or undemocratic to speak well and smoothly. We feel more comfortable with awkward, clumsy speech and accept a minimal, unmusical, fragmented vocabulary as the norm. A book reviewer, in talking of a poet recently, made a statement which haunts me. He said: "He has none of the American embarrassment about being well-educated ... especially in the United States where life is not witty and does not aim to be articulate." Too many programs on national television are careless of English pronunciation and diction. These slipshod pronunciations are defended on the ground that they provide

naturalness and local color, that there is a kind of snobbishness about presenting to the AAV (Average American Viewer) clear diction and correct grammar. I have been criticized for unduly stressing clarity of enunciation, but I defend myself myself with something I read in a pamphlet during one of our wars. It stated that "in the area of national defense, an unintelligible word or an indistinct command on the battlefield may cost the needless sacrifice of lives or put an entire nation in jeopardy." It further warns: "They say in the Navy ... 'communications cannot win a war, but they sure as hell can lose it.'" If, it is also true that our best teaching is by example, then it surely follows that proficiency in oral language should be a major requirement for the certification of an English teacher. As for the students, I personally would like to see speech majors given their own classrooms and equal billing with music, art, industrial arts, and homemaking at the secondary level. The rewards might be amazing.

Which brings me to my final point about censorship imposed by a group or groups. What I have to say on the subject of interdisciplinary teaching is not new, but I confess I grow weary of the lip-service being given with absolutely no solid action toward the fulfillment of this goal. I suspect it is partly because each of us, entrenched behind the separate walls of our disciplines, mentally remove "any information that is secret" (to go back to the definition of censorship I am using) and vigorously resist giving up any of our autonomy for the greater good. And, you know, I blame us, the English teachers and the reading people most of all. We should be lighting the way -- they need us, and they are seeing it before we do. As an example, I will cite from the program for the 7th New England Regional Conference on the Social Studies held here in Boston and just closed yesterday April 3. There were at least five -- count them -- five sessions devoted to our field on topics which I was hard-pressed to find in our list of-

of offerings to our conference attendants. These sessions were as follows:

1. Talking is Our Business -- investigate small-group discussion, problem-solving skills, and children's books, particularly in the genre of fantasy, to present conflict situations.
2. Why Our Students Can't Read and What We Can Do About It -- to acquaint content-area teachers on the secondary level with practical means of helping students read content-area subjects.
3. Medieval Renaissance Culture: A Humanities Course in High School Interdisciplinary approach ... integrating art, music, history, and literature ....
4. COVE Program -- Multidisciplinary -- a multidisciplinary alternative where the artificial barriers between social sciences, science, and English are torn down and learning is centered in student content and skills.
5. Social Studies Teachers Don't Teach Reading: We Consume It -- Practical strategies to increase comprehension in the reading assignment. Immediately useful ways to increase comprehension and student performance.

I'm jealous. I wish we'd thought of more of this kind of session.

A major roadblock to the achievement of this Utopian goal of interdisciplinary teaching is the fact that very few secondary teachers in any content area, and this includes English, have had, or are required to have a reading course in their college course of study. English teachers as a group have no greater competency for teaching reading than any other group of teachers. All teachers within the context of their teaching area, must develpp the ability to contribute to effective reading, but it would be

relatively difficult to find a teacher-training institution including in its curriculum a course in secondary reading procedures as part of the program for math, science, and social studies majors to give the would-be teachers in all content areas the know-how to deal with word recognition, critical perception, or reading to discover relationships. I feel deeply that interdisciplinary teaching is one positive response to the state of skills proficiency (or lack of it) we find in secondary students today. I think it is pretty much a question of survival in this graceless, inarticulate age.

The creators of the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak did so out of indignant protest that we, the people, were being mis-governed and misguided by the misuse of words. One scholar tells us: "The vehicle of all speaking and writing, as of all thinking, is language. Damage that vehicle and you damage the most important means by which progress, whether spiritual or moral or intellectual, moves to its ends. To degrade language is to degrade civilization. As language grows more meagre and inept so will civilization become like a crippled and bewildered animal." (2) I see that bewildered look more and more in the eyes and faces of our educated non-literates. If we hope to have any defense against the floodtide of propaganda and mind manipulation it can only be if we turn our backs on the kind of censorship in which I think we've indulged, that which is self-imposed, and that of a group or groups. If we don't teach with sensitivity and wisdom the nuances and subtleties which go with the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, it will do us no good at all to talk about Doublespeak and its ills, because we will be teaching English as a second language.

(1) Dieterich, Daniel, editor, Teaching About Doublespeak. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.

(2) Partridge, Eric, "Degraded Language," The New York Times Book Review (September 18, 1966), pp. 1-3.

(3) Sheils, Merrill, "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek (December 8, 1975), pp. 58-65.