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ABSTRACT

In a doctoral program begun recently at the University of Virginia, the English department has combined three areas of study considered essential for graduate students who expect to be teaching. Titled Language, Literature, and Pedagogy (to balance the traditional degree in language, literature, and research), the program grew out of a dissatisfaction with graduate education in English, a realization that graduate professors in English are engaged in teacher training, and a conviction that a new synthesis of literary study and the career needs of the majority of students has been needed for a long time. Carefully selected students for the program consist only of those with distinguished undergraduate and master's degree records and with proof or strong promise of excellence in teaching. In a highly successful arrangement, students have been placed as teaching interns in community colleges. Faculty and student responses have been most favorable, and correspondence suggests that the imaginations have been stirred in other departments and institutions. (JM)

Watering Up the Ph.D.: Language, Literature, and Pedagogy at the University of Virginia

Harold H. Kolb Jr.

American educators may have been momentarily gratified by last December's Newsweek cover which showed a longish-haired but clean-cut young man, a college freshman perhaps, hard at work in a book-filled study. But this apparent tribute to the academic world quickly dissolved when a closer look revealed a desk full of blotted and crumpled papers and an expression of painful dismay on the student's face. Behind the cover was an article--"Why Johnny Can't Write"--containing the specifications of an intensifying national problem: declining Scholastic Aptitude Test scores in verbal skills for the past twelve years; an erosion of student reading ability since 1965, according to a Department of Health, Education, and Welfare study; increasingly simplistic sentence structure and vocabulary usage in the writing of all Americans revealed by the work of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; and a virtually unanimous outcry from business, professions, the Civil Service Commission, and graduate schools that young Americans are not competent in basic reading and writing. The indictment was clearly spelled out for Newsweek's three million readers:

> If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of

> structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. And if they are attending elementary school, they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them eventually to write comprehensible English.[1]

The most alarming aspect of this situation is that many of Johnny's teachers, and those who teach his teachers, do not disagree. Most of us, in fact, would wish to add to Newsweek's specifications. The reasons for these low and apparently lowering scores in verbal ability are usually given in terms of space age machines (television, telephone, computer) and contemporary attitudes (the decline of usage distinctions, the belief in the primacy of speech, the lessening of reading and writing requirements in secondary schools).[2] But they can also be traced to long-standing inadequacies of graduate education in English, inadequacies stemming from the assumptions that graduate students need little training in the teaching of writing and reading; that language study is not a necessary part of literary study; that graduate students need most to be thoroughly grounded in methods of research and dissertation production; and that teaching, like swimming, is learned by being tossed in the water. But in fact,

large numbers of graduate students, even from leading universities, seldom engage in genuine research either in or out of graduate school, and do little or no publishing during their careers.[3] Entries in Dissertation Abstracts are more often memorial services than christenings--final rituals of graduate training that prepares students for jobs most of them will never hold. A majority of graduate students in English will eventually identify themselves as teachers rather than researchers, and they will spend much of their time teaching subjects which their graduate educations have neglected--a malign neglect compounded by the catch-22 situation that a majority of graduate English students have been exempted all along from courses in grammar and composition. Even in strictly literary fields much of their teaching will demand a breadth of knowledge that specialized and now streamlined courses of graduate study exclude. Whether we like it or not, and however much we shudder at the term, graduate professors of English are engaged in teacher training, and it is one of the ironies of the age that only now, when for the first time since World War II graduate students do not automatically step into teaching positions, are we becoming aware of what we should have been doing all along. Any swimming coach would reject the sudden submersion theory of education, and would, if he thought about it, have doubts about professors of English. Such doubts, growing louder in the bill-paying community outside, are legitimate. A large percentage of graduate training in English has been inappropriate for the careers most graduate students have found.

Yet the traditional responses to these doubts can not be

dismissed. There is no easy one-to-one relationship between educational training and occupational practice, and mindless vocationalism is precisely the objection made against schools of education. Excellence in teaching is indeed based on scholarship and research, for nothing is more essential in a classroom than the mastery of a body of knowledge and the creative exploration that refreshes knowledge, whether that exploration comes to life in print or in a student's mind. The dissertation may not always be a contribution to scholarship, but it is usually a contribution to the candidate's ability to seize and hold an intellectual territory, an ability that will be tested many times in the classroom. And finally, many of the communicative skills of teaching are irreducibly experiential, not to be learned by course or book. If sudden submersion is an inadequate technique, so is learning to swim on dry land.

What is needed, what has been needed for many decades, is a new synthesis of literary study and the career needs of the majority of our students. Yet professors of English who like to cite the admonition to know thyself are as recalcitrant about self knowledge as the members of any other corporate body. We have, for the most part, failed to understand that training teachers is the responsibility of graduate departments of English--a responsibility too important to subcontract to schools of education, and one that demands the commitment of our best students and most distinguished professors. It is curious that one of the factors in this failure of understanding is the pervasive idea that the training of teachers is somehow inferior, and that such

training can be accomplished only through an adulteration of subject matter, a compromise with excellence. Yet it is not the hostile world of business, nor the sharp-eyed money changers of legislatures, nor even the sleepy-eyed students in the back rows who have created this notion. The enemy, as Walt Kelly has taught an entire generation, is us.

The attempt of the University of Virginia to break through the self-fulfilling cliché that training teachers is inferior to training scholars grew out of our specific institutional history focused in the new light of the 1970's. In the recent years of rapid expansion, vigorous faculty recruiting, and strong support from the Virginia General Assembly, the Department of English shared the excitement of a university newly awakened to the national destiny envisioned by its founder. The University of Virginia, living up to Jefferson's notion that "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing," doubled its student body, opened its doors to women and blacks, revised its undergraduate curriculum, encouraged research programs, and established a Center for Advanced Studies which attracted scholars from all parts of the country. Both a leader and a beneficiary of this drive for excellence, the Department of English found itself in the late 1960's numbered among the major departments in the country--an achievement which increased the number and the quality of students applying to study for M.A., M.A.T., and Ph.D. degrees. As the Department began to reach what our colleagues in physics call steady state, we decided to examine the implications

of our recent history. Departmental committees recommended changes in the undergraduate programs--for the improvement in the Department had first been felt on the graduate level--and an increased commitment to the training of teachers as well as scholars since teaching was, after all, the occupation of almost all of the scholars we produced. Many faculty members and students on these committees believed that, although we should continue to train research-oriented Ph.D.'s, the resources of the Department should also be deployed across a wider range to help improve the teaching of English at a variety of levels.

These ideas were seconded by developments inside and outside the University in the early years of the 1970's. We had, on one hand, a number of excellent students who felt restricted by the specialities of the Ph.D. Moreover, they felt unsatisfied with the prospect of teaching careers that would engage their talents as professors largely in training apprentice professors--a cycle revolving slowly on the top of the educational hierarchy while basic needs were neglected below. Six of our strongest graduate students, who were given internships in community colleges as a condition of fellowship support, confounded our prejudices by electing to stay in the community college system. On the other hand, the increase in Ph.D. holders and stabilized college enrollments clearly showed less need for doctors of philosophy in college and university employment. The trickle-down theory, that supposed lower levels of education would be staffed with surplus Ph.D.'s, did not work and did not deserve to, since it bred inappropriate training and attitudes, and was based on a presumption

of superiority that was rightly resented in community colleges and high schools. A more radical proposal seemed necessary, and for the first time, in a faculty meeting in October, 1973, we seriously considered redeploying a portion of our energies from the research Ph.D. and investing them in training some of our bright and highly motivated students in new ways for teaching in four-year institutions as well as high schools and two-year colleges.[4]

Although we did not fully recognize it at the time, this redeployment had begun timidly two years earlier when, unsatisfied with student performance on M.A.T. final examinations, the Department analyzed the step-child degree and discovered that however admirable in theory, the Master of Arts in Teaching program produced masters of nothing. A one-year handful of courses split between the Department of English and the School of Education, and complicated rather than enhanced by a public-school internship, failed to unlock the possibilities either of content or of method.

As a result, we opened discussions--first held on neutral ground--with the School of Education and negotiated a combined program which gives the candidate substantial, coordinated training in English and education, and--after two years' work--awards him both the Master of Arts (in English) and the Master of Education (in English Education) degrees. The new program immediately began to attract and produce stronger candidates. It was an experiment that engendered others, and within the year we were offering a team-taught course in the Theory of Discourse as well

as a new series, Texts and Contexts, designed to consider selected literary works, historical periods, and transitions between periods from the point of view of practical pedagogy. It was about this time that Shakespeare for the Critic and Teacher first appeared in our catalogue, soon to be followed by Film for the Critic and Teacher. These successful courses generated new questions as we stood at the point of convergence of a strengthened department, a recognition of long-standing inadequacies in graduate education, and the ungentle shove of demographic and historical forces. Was it possible to follow these M.A. paths to higher levels? Was a first-rate, uncompromised, doctoral degree combining the study of language, literature, and pedagogy possible?

Careful study of these questions and the tentatively affirmative answers we unearthed led us to knock on the door of the National Endowment for the Humanities. In November 1974, NEH awarded us a planning grant for the creation of a new doctoral degree. This support was as significant psychologically as it was financally, for our association with the widely respected Endowment turned some heads that had only nodded our way before and we found that students, vice-presidents, and community college division chairmen seemed to listen more attentively. At this stage we listened also, and sought advice from many quarters. We attended conferences, gave talks, sent out prospective programs, invited debate, and questioned students, former students, prospective students, teachers at all

levels, college faculty and administrators, high school department heads, and two-year college representatives. We researched the fate of alternative doctoral degrees. This process gave us a new feeling of collegiality with teachers of English at all levels, an increasing enthusiasm for our task, and a change of name. Our planning grant proposal had spoken of a "Doctor of Arts degree in English language and literature," perhaps because the name--which may have sounded exotic to a department of Ph.D.'s--suggested our commitment to a different idea. Once that difference was clearly understood, however, the distinctive name was no longer necessary, for we knew that while our focus was different our rigor was not. What was needed was a new kind of Ph.D., one strong in the traditional excellence of literary study, but one that also investigated the teaching of writing and reading; that offered opportunities for work in linguistics, black literature, English as a second language, drama, film, and folklore; that required a substantial teaching apprenticeship; and that loosened the grip of the conventional dissertation. In the spring of 1975 the Department voted to call the new program a Ph.D. in Language, Literature, and Pedagogy, at the same time balancing the equation by renaming the traditional degree a Ph.D. in Language, Literature, and Research.

The summer found us at work defining the requirements of the program, publicizing it, interviewing prospective candidates, preparing for such new courses as Teaching Composition and the Teaching Colloquium, discussing internships with outside institutions, and consulting with our departmental colleagues and with

those in the cooperating departments of Anthropology, Drama French and General Linguistics, Psychology, and Speech Communication, and the School of Education. By September we had communicated with over one hundred potential students and presented a slate to the Department for consideration at its fall meeting on admission to candidacy for the Ph.D. After a searching discussion, the Department accepted only six students and in doing so hammered out a philosophy that marked a crucial point in the development of the new degree. The Department selected only those students with distinguished undergraduate and M.A. records and with proof or strong promise of excellence in teaching. Average students, the uncommitted, those who turned to pedagogy because of failure or fear of failure in the research degree, those merely trying to stitch miscellaneous careers together with doctoral thread were all rejected. As news of this meeting spread, the students quickly learned that only the strong need apply. "My God," exclaimed one candidate, "it's a watered up Ph.D." The wisdom of this rigorous screening became more and more apparent as the year progressed. The high quality and the achievements of the students in the program--five more were added during the year--persuaded those who had been unconvinced, whether faculty or students, that we had indeed created an alternative without compromising the integrity of literary study.

After only one year, much remains to be done. We need to increase the number of students in the program and diversify the internships, giving candidates a taste of different teaching

environments and taking advantage of the substantial teaching experience many of them have had. We need to introduce new courses, especially in the areas of language study and reading, and to rely less on courses in other departments which are not shaped to our purposes. At this stage it is too early to evaluate the program and to predict its outcome, but there are some promising indicators. The original students are solidly on track, and we are continuing to attract strong candidates. A number of faculty members have asked to teach new courses: Reader Response (Ralph Cohen); Teaching Fiction (Anthony Winner); The Linguistics of Literacy (E. D. Hirsch, Jr.); Black Literature for the Critic and Teacher (Raymond Nelson). The response from the outside community has been heartening. We placed interns at Virginia Commonwealth University, Piedmont Virginia Community College, Germanna Community College, and helped to establish a special program in literature for gifted students in nearby Walker Middle School. All these internships were successful; all the participating institutions, who paid the interns' salaries, have asked to continue the relationships. Two colleges have offered us open-ended internships which will be available every year. One of our students was appointed to supervise practice teachers in Albemarle County High School; another has been asked to serve, next year, as assistant to the English Coordinator in the public school system. We have, in fact, an embarrassment of riches, for we have more offers of internships than we can fill.

There have been other benefits, less tangible but important. Since the pedagogy students take many of our regular classes and the new courses are open to--and popular with--research Ph.D. candidates, a fruitful relationship between the two programs has developed The scholarly challenge of re s has set high goals for students in the pedagogy d the new emphases on te ng have spilled into other areas of the department. We recently created a departmental committee on teaching to evaluate and improve instruction from fledgling graduate instructors to chaired professors. E. D. Hirsch, in an administrative move that is surely unprecedented, left the chairmanship of the Department to become Director of Composition. Faculty members in other departments--William Abbot, James Madison Professor of History, and Joseph Strzepek, associate professor in the School of Education--have asked for a share of the action by teaching freshman composition in the coming year. And the correspondence we have received--from Alberta to Luxembourg--

suggests we have stirred the imaginations of other departments and institutions. At this point we have learned that it is possible for a department to pass on its knowledge about teaching as well as its scholarship, that instruction in writing and reading are essential responsibilities of graduate departments of English, and that there is no inherent contradiction between pedagogical training and excellence in literary scholarship. With that much learning going on, among professors as well as students, we see no reason for despair in considering the future of graduate studies in English.

Notes

1. Merrill Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek (8 December 1975), p. 58. The average scores on the verbal section of the College Entrance Examination Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test given to 996,000 high school students dropped from 444 in 1974 to 434 in 1975, the largest drop in a pattern of general decline that has occurred since 1963. The American College Testing Program, which reached 850,000 high school seniors in 1974-75, also reports significantly lower scores. See The Chronicle of Higher Education for 15 September, 1975, pp. 1, 18-19.

Gene Lyon, with the pungent acerbity of the disaffected insider, converts Newsweek's statistics into a wholesale attack on universities and departments of English in September's Harper's:

> Teaching individual students to read, write, and think is surely not what the American university is about. Like many other bureaucracies our universities have become in large measure ingrown, so self-contained that most of their faculties believe, without ever pausing to think about it, that what is good for them is good for the culture at large. In English departments, where one would expect a concern for literacy to be located, the attitude of self-interest appears to be all but universal. Far from resisting the general dissolution, English professors as a group pay almost no attention at all to such mundane topics as literate writing. If

> they have the misfortune to get stuck in a school that forces them to teach that horror beyond contemplation, freshman composition, they teach it against their will. The business of the American English department is not the teaching of literacy; it is th[illegible] of literature.

("The Higher Illiteracy," Harper's, September 1976, p. 34).

Harper's, however, seems to be hedging its bets. Lyon's six-page attack on English professors is followed by a sixteen-page excerpt from Professor Carl Bode's forthcoming edition of Mencken's letters.

2. Professor William S. Verplanck is of the opinion that the tests may be faulty, that the "Psychometric Establishment" itself needs to be examined. Research by David E. Wiley and Annegret Harnischfeger relates lower test scores to the drop in the number of high school students taking college preparatory courses. Leo A. Munday studied the test results for the American College Testing Program and suggests that "much of the decline in test scores may be due to a larger percentage of low-ability women planning to attend college." Increasing absenteeism but fewer dropouts in high schools, higher student-teacher ratios, and cuts in educational funding may also have affected the results. See The Chronicle of Higher Education for 22 December 1975 and 17 February 1976.

If there is a consensus it seems to be that the tests are not infallible, but that they do indicate lower verbal skills as well as possible changes in the composition and preparation of the test-taking population. Sidney P. Marland, Jr., President of the College Entrance Examination Board, would caution that the S.A.T. examination is designed to predict in college rather than to evaluate high school performance, and that verbal ability measured by the examination is a product of learning both in and out of the classroom. Johnny's illiteracy impeaches his society as well as his school.

3. Don Cameron Allen's The Ph.D. in English and American Literature (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) reported that 59% of the recent recipients of the Ph.D. in English had not published their dissertations in either monograph or article form. The recent Ladd-Lipset survey of 7,800 college and university faculty members in all disciplines reveals that 71% define themselves as teachers or professionals, only 28% as scholars, scientists, or intellectuals; 54% have never written a book; 34% have never published an article. For every professor who indicated that he was strongly devoted to research nine others stated they were strongly devoted to teaching. The lengthy survey, conducted by Everett Carll Ladd, Jr. and Semour Martin Lipset,

is being published serially in The Chronicle of Higher Education. See the issue for 14 October 1975 for statistics and attitudes on faculty publishing.

4. Departmental committees and individuals had considered these issues sporadically in the past. As early as 1961, in The Graduate Journal, Fredson Bowers called for the establishment of a Doctor of Arts degree that would "retain the doctoral standards of accomplishment and everything that is best in the Ph.D. for the needs of good undergraduate teaching. I think a program would be satisfactory that would include all that is now required by the Ph.D. except for the dissertation and its accompanying specialized final examination." Later in the decade F. R. Hart surveyed potential employers, and concluded that the D.A. degree would not find wide acceptance, a conclusion substantiated by Malcolm Scully's article, "The Doctor of Arts Settles into a Small Niche," in The Chronicle of Higher Education for 7 July 1975.

The impetus for innovation nationally can be seen in Robert Koepker's annual "Status of the Doctor of Arts Degree" (available in mimeographed form since 1970 from the Graduate School, Ball State University) which lists twelve institutions that offer the Doctor of Arts degree in English. Perhaps that number offer unspecified doctoral programs "similar to the D.A. degree." Experimentation and diversification

were recently urged by the National Board on Graduate Education in their final report entitled Outlook and Opportunities for Graduate Education (Washington, D. C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1975). And the mushrooming institutes and programs in faculty development should be considered as part of the landscape of change.