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AUTHOR Weidner, Heidemarie Z.
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ABSTRACT

While concerns over literacy are common in contemporary times, similar concerns have been raised in other historical periods. Despite earlier predictions of American mastery of English, the Harvard Reports of the 1890s reflected anxiety over literacy among freshman college students from even "the best families in point of culture and breeding, and from the best schools." In addressing who was responsible for the problem, language critics and educators of the era engaged not so much in soul searching as in blame shifting. Preparatory schools took the brunt of the attacks. The students themselves were criticized for spending too much time in the lower levels of education. Other targets included "the home, the very cheap newspaper, the street" and even advertising, which was labeled an "acknowledged evil" and a "perversion of talent." The colleges themselves and their entrance examinations were attacked by critics. It is hoped that present-day calls for educational reform will seek out effective solutions and not just a revival of educational methods that do not work. (Fifty-eight references are attached.) (SG)

Heidemarie Z. Weidner
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292

Back to the Future

Concerns over literacy are all around us. In my paper I would like to take you back in time to the second half of the last century. It is the time of the Harvard Reports. Issued in 1892, 1895, and 1897 respectively, they mercilessly exposed the "bad" English of freshmen and shocked the nineteenth-century educational and cultural community. Journals, magazines, newspapers addressed the "growing illiteracy" of students while diligently shifting blame from one institution to another--from college to preparatory school to high school to elementary school. In addition, parents, the media, and American society as a whole received their fair share of criticism.

While literacy crises are as old as literate time itself (Daniels 33), their definition and scope vary. Thus, literacy in the nineteenth century did not suffer from the multitude of definitions we labor under today. It usually described basic skills--orthography, punctuation, grammar, paragraphs, style, even penmanship. In addition, the "illiterate boys" of the Harvard Reports were "picked boys" (Goodwin 292), that is, boys from "the best families in point of culture and breeding, and from the best schools" (Hill, "English/Schools," 123).

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Early Americans showed few signs of linguistic uneasiness (Daniels 33). Walt Whitman, filled with the upbeat spirit of a new nation, so believed in America and her people that in 1850 he

could exclaim: "The Americans are going to be the most fluent and melodious voiced people in the world--and the most perfect users of words" (Mencken 73). Yet only 42 years later, the first report of the Committee on English Composition and Rhetoric to the Harvard Overseers complained vociferously about the "inefficiency of most pupils, and the deplorable neglect of most schools, in the matter of English composition" (Nation 1892, 388). Had Whitman been overly enthusiastic? What had happened between his exuberance and the disillusioned voice of the Committee? What trends in philosophy and educational theory, what shifts in political, economic, and social circumstances altered so dramatically the attitude towards the American tongue?

Most of Walt Whitman's copatriots rejoiced in the American language only a few years longer. From the late sixties on, Americans and their language entered a troubled relationship. Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, assumed the task of language guardian. He acknowledged in 1871 that "bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation" had become a great problem in beginning freshman classes and called for entrance exams (qtd. in Judy, "Composition," 36). Two years later, all Harvard applicants had to pass a written composition, an exam soon imitated by most colleges and universities. This requirement emphasized orthography, punctuation, grammar, and expression. In 1877, paragraphing was tested; and in 1882, students rewrote bad sentences as further proof of their competency (Kitzhaber 57, 72).

But despite the fact that grammar schools now prepared

students to pass these exams, the candidates still displayed the "tedious mediocrity" and disgraceful errors of their predecessors (Hill, "English/Schools 124). In 1879, when 50 percent of Harvard's applicants failed the entrance examination, many were admitted "on condition," thus costing the college time and money to move these "conditioned" students into regular, college-level classes (Hill, "Answer," 11).

In the 1890s, concern over the literacy of America's freshmen reached new heights. Harvard appointed three laymen--E. L. Godkin, Charles F. Adams, and Josiah Quincy--to examine composition and rhetoric at the college. Their efforts resulted in the three reports mentioned earlier. This is how W. P. Garrison described the work of the Committee in 1892: "Unhappy instructors were confronted with immature thoughts set down in a crabbed and slovenly hand, miserably expressed and wretchedly spelled" (299-300). To show that preparatory schools were responsible for their students' failures, the Committee administered a survey to incoming freshmen, asking them to "tell all" about their schools' teaching methods. Adding insult to injury, the Committee then printed the "worst specimens . . . in reduced facsimile" to "raise a blush on the cheek of every principal who reads" them ("English/Prep" 388).

Three years later, the Committee printed 16 translation examinations in order to examine "what advances, if any, [had] been made." The 1892 report had found these translations not to be "English, but a close approach to gibberish." The new batch fared even worse. A writer in The Nation labeled the 1895 examples "a

low order of comic literature" and remarked acidly that "the ignorance of Latin and ignorance of English are here displayed in about equal proportion" ("College English" 219-220). Another correspondent remarked, "They are simply trying to translate from one unknown tongue into another" (Goodwin 291-292).

The Committee's last report was based on 1,300 examination papers. They again illustrated "the growing illiteracy of American boys," a phrase that had by now become a household word. Examiners complained that "the problem with the papers was almost entirely grammatical and mechanical" (Judy 185) and "that the most noticeable feature . . . [was] their extreme crudeness both of thought and execution" (201). Examiners' marks reflected their dismay: only one paper received an A and 96% of them C+ or below.

Who was to blame for this pitiful state of affairs? Concerned teachers and public figures had addressed this question even before the Harvard Reports appeared in print. Language critics and educators, however, engaged not so much in soul searching as in blame shifting. As late as 1873, John Eaton, Commissioner of Education, still complimented the high schools for preparing students for college as well as for practical life (Judy 71). Now the lower schools suffered attacks from everywhere. President Eliot showed a certain neutrality by distributing the faults evenly to schools, to family, and to society at large, although, more often than not, formal rather than informal education got the whip. In his essay "What Is a Liberal Education?", Eliot criticized the preparatory schools for not improving their instructions, forcing colleges to pick up the

slack (100).

For most college men, the Committee included, reasons for the poor performance of incoming freshmen lay indeed with the "defective and inadequate training in the preparatory schools," especially their continued use of oral teaching methods and neglect of daily writing practice (qtd. in "English at Harvard" 300). Naturally, the preparatory schools refused to be the scapegoat for everybody else. Garrison understood their plight: "In order to distribute the burden sought to be thrust upon them, [the preparatory schools] must in turn cry out against the grammar school and the primary school" (300). Many of them did, and thus the name calling continued. Eventually, an angry public sought and found culprits among ill-prepared teachers, lazy students, neglectful parents, an indifferent society, and the sensationalist media.

"How can our students speak and write a graceful English when their own teachers would fail the colleges' entrance examinations?" ("College English" 220). Critics repeatedly asked this question. "One may go into half the schools of this city and find children taught by twangy, slangy, slipshod speakers," said one of them (220). But according to John J. Jennings, a connection between illprepared teachers and their salaries existed: "It is impossible, of course, to obtain competent instructors without paying the market price in the way of salaries" (455).

Students themselves must shoulder some of the blame for their

failure in college admission examinations, said Goodwin. They spent "seven or eight years in doing work which should have been done in five or six" (292). Much needed reforms would allow boys to begin their systematic studies earlier. "In the mean time," Goodwin argued, colleges "can apply powerful pressure from above upon the schools below them, which will be in turn eagerly transmitted to the lower level where the real work must be done" (293).

Several educators and writers accused parents by citing President Eliot: " I believe it is chiefly the fault of parents and of unfavorable conditions of American society" (Harrison 310). William F. Brewer echoed this sentiment when he considered the time a teacher has to protect h s students from influences elsewhere: "The home, the very cheap newspaper, the street, have furnished them with their common speech . . . under varicus circumstances from their infancy, without any vacation, and for a good many hours a day" (327). Brewer also included advertisement among these corrupting forces and called it an "acknowledged evil" which like "no other perversion of talent has done so much to vulgarize our speech" (327).

Finally, the fault-finding and criticizing came full turn: The blame lay with the colleges and their entrance examinations. Without these requirements, the schools could concentrate on real teaching instead of preparing students for a mere test. Elmer L. Curtiss, a Massachusetts superintendent of schools, vehemently condemned the examination system:

> The lower schools do not have the 'college requirements'

> standing before them as a bar to good, honest teaching; and consequently they direct their efforts to child development rather than to stuff so much of this, that, and the other into the pupil in a given time that he may pass an absurd examination. (n.p.)

The complaints about the "growing illiteracy of American boys" and the search for explanations did not occur in a vacuum. Historians of 19th-century composition and rhetoric list several causes for the literacy crisis: the sudden growth of colleges and universities, the diversity of student preparation, and the lack of adequately trained instructors. While these explanations carry considerable merit, additional factors contributed to the preoccupation with entrance examinations, i.e., a shift in attitude towards language, changes in philosophy and educational theory, and a new technology and industry.

As mentioned earlier, initially Americans had felt mostly positive about the "new" English shaped by settlers from such differing linguistic backgrounds. Walt Whitman celebrated the common speech in his poems and writings: "The Real Dictionary will give all the words that exist in use, the bad words as well as any. The Real Grammar will be that which declares itself a nucleus of the spirit of the laws, with liberty to all to carry out the spirit of the laws, even by violating them, if necessary" (qtd. in Mencken 73-74).

This "respite from linguistic insecurity" was brief (Daniels 45). After 1850, British attacks against Americanisms convinced Americans that their language was "a tangled mess badly needing to

be straightened out, standardized, and taught in an orderly manner to children and adults alike" (48). Newspapers and journals published innumerable articles on good versus bad English while readers engaged in lively exchanges about usage in the correspondence sections of these publications.

Writers like Richard Grant White--Daniels calls him the "Edwin Newman of his day" (49)--and George Perkins Marsh, lecturer at Columbia College, worked diligently to purify American English. From 1867 to 1870, White chastized fellow Americans in his Galaxy column, condemning "the degradation of language, the utter abolition of simple, clear and manly speech." Like later the Harvard Committee of the 1890s, White accused the schools, the popular press, advertising, even democracy itself for the deterioration of the language.

Although less prescriptive than White, Marsh saw the corruption of language go hand in hand with the downfall of a race (646-47). Therefore, accidental corruption had to be resisted through the study of Anglo-Saxon, an English Marsh considered still pure (381ff).

Many contemporaries of Marsh shared his views about the close connection between language, thought, and action. Charles F. Thwing argued that "if to think is important, linguistic training is important. For we think in words. Therefore, thinking becomes clear, orderly, profound, as language is adequate" (274). M.H. Buckham, professor of Greek at the University of Vermont, agreed, "The purity of language expresses and aids clearness of thought: vulgarity, profanity, coarseness, carelessness in language, deepen

the characteristics they express" (qtd. Judy 117). In this kind of thinking,

> any error, a misplaced comma, a dangling participle, or a disunified paragraph, was not simply an error in communication or a stylistic infelicity, but an error in thought. Disorganized papers came from disorganized minds; punctuation was as important as sentence construction. Language instruction therefore took on enormous implications, for through correct and methodical instruction a person's mind could also be improved. (125-126)

The influence of 18th-century faculty psychology, still popular with American educational theorists, assisted such ideas about language. For William H. Russell, language accompanied the three stages of observation, reflection, and expression. First, language helped the mind sort out experience by supplying a vocabulary; second, language facilitated thought because all thought was believed to be verbal thought; and third, language was, of course, the medium of communication (Judy 100-03).

Yet faculty psychology's particular appeal lay in its use of the scientific method which may have become, so Stephen Judy argues, "in part responsible for the demand for method" and the emphasis on practicality, simplicity, and frequency in language teaching and textbook writing (96-97).

Method, practicality, and simplicity--these concepts also ruled the forces of industry and business, forces that helped change America from an agricultural, self-contained nation into

the urban, industrialized, world-open giant she is today. Therefore, representatives from business and industry supported education and in particular those educational theories that directly catered to their needs.

Schools interpreted those needs as workers who could write and read and do a little arithmetic and therefore better their station in life. Yet literacy provided, in equal measures, productivity and benefits to society as a whole (Graff 236). Most of all, literacy meant having a more orderly, disciplined mind. Manufacturers, of course, valued disciplined minds. More than the reading and writing, they appreciated this side effect of schooling. Over cognitive skills, they preferred their workers' cleanliness, their positive attitude, and their punctuality. And indeed, mass schooling and public education promoted "discipline, morality, and the 'training in being trained' that mattered most in the creation and preparation of a modern industrial and urban work force" (Graff 260).

Richard Ohmann argues that the Industrial Revolution required a consciousness "that could see and approve the opportunity for extended control through technique" (266). After the Harvard Reports, many educators likewise saw their salvation in technique. They stressed systematic and simplified approaches to writing. Following a step-by-step method, observing a great many rules, most students did achieve mechanical correctness but lost freshness of expression. Teachers like Hill and Barrett Wendell, influential writers of highly prescriptive composition texts, despaired over the results their texts achieved. The students,

Hill complained, could not "put forth naturally and with the force of their own personality." His eloquent description of "theme language" will strike a chord in all writing teachers:

> I know no language--ancient or modern, civilized or savage--so insufficient for the purposes of language, so dreary and inexpressive, as theme language in the mass. How two or three hundred young men, who seem to be really alive as they appear in the flesh, can have kept themselves entirely out of their writing, it is impossible to understand. ("English/Colleges" 511)

Hill did not see the connection between his text books and the dull, mechanistic, albeit correct, writing of his freshman students. Let us hope we will explore the implications and find more effective solutions to our present literacy crisis than merely revive methods that did not work.

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