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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of 6 National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 14th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Composition (Christine Kline); (2) Commission on Curriculum (Kathleen Andrasick); (3) Commission on Language (Judith Lindfors); (4) Commission on Literature (Carol Jago); (5) Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller); and (6) Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: relationships among computers, writing, and the teaching of writing; assessment in writing; what constitutes good writing; thoughtful implementation of English language arts standards; the increasing integration of the curriculum; professional development; authentic assessment; laws mandating specific methodology for elementary and secondary classrooms and teacher education programs; language study in the classroom; exclusion of controversial issues from oral and written classroom discussions; the growing emphasis on standards in both the schools and in public discourse about education; a growing public concern and discussion of the ethics and impact of the media on various American institutions; use of television and film to encourage reading and thoughtful discussion; censorship; copyright law; support for public schooling; professional development of teachers; informed discussion about reading theory, research, and practice in the national and professional conversation; and understanding the complex intersections among race, class, gender, and language in reading, literacy curriculum, and practices in mainstream, bilingual multicultural communities. (RS)

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1997--SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

compiled by Charles Suhor, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the fourteenth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

The Commission on Composition (Christine Kline, Director) continues to focus on the relationships among computers, writing, and the teaching of writing. The deliberations, informed by discussions in an open forum held at the NCTE Chicago Convention, include major questions about access. Who has access to computer technology? What is the nature of the access? We are concerned about the inequalities of access in schools at all levels.

The significance of access becomes apparent when we note that certain students may not only have more opportunities to compose on the computer, but also that they may be learning new modes or genres that are part of the intellectual, civic and social requirements of this society. Many say that computer use is changing the shape, genre, form and delivery of writing. In what ways do students with computer access grow in writing? How do we consider the impact of these changes on writing growth. How does this technology affect their writing, their representation of the world, their evolving place in the world? What difference will it make to those who are denied access?

We also are interested in the ways in which regular composing on computers changes the nature of the writing classroom and shapes the role of teaching. Are there expanded opportunities in computer-rich classrooms for student collaboration in composing, for more collaborative relationships between learner and teacher, and for more collaborative efforts in the world beyond the classroom? The Commission addressed these issues in convention sessions and would like to see increased attention to them in a wider number of Council forums.

Assessment in writing continues to be a major concern of the Commission. Assessment should derive from and be congruent with our best knowledge about writing and learning. Assessment practices should not merely monitor writing growth; assessment practices should sponsor writing growth. We believe that continued attention needs be paid to assessment practices that are congruent with and embedded in substantial, ongoing classroom writing experiences.

We also believe that continued attention needs be paid to expanded notions of what constitutes good writing across a range and at different developmental levels. How do we detect aspects of good writing in a given piece? How does it hold with other samples of that student's writing in

different modes or genres? How do we adequately describe features of writing, particularly aspects of writing that are beyond conventions? How do we detect promise or a new reach in a piece that doesn't otherwise meet given standards? How do we both energize and enable a student to move to new modes, new skill, new conceptual ground? Commission members agree that teachers of writing at all levels of education are eager to know more about the deeper issues of assessment and the practices that will enable them to help all students grow as writers.

The Commission on Curriculum (Kathleen Andrasick, Director) applauds the thoughtful implementation of English language arts standards. We also recognize continuing positive trends such as teachers using information gained from research, including research from their own classrooms; implementation of curriculum and methodologies that accommodate pluralism, varied learning styles, and interactive technologies; and the use, at all levels, of quality literature that represents gender and cultural diversity. The Commission acknowledges another positive trend in the expansion of literacy to encompass the rich oral traditions of culturally diverse families. We continue to encourage teachers and community members to become involved in curriculum processes but caution that input from the community must be balanced with the strong professional voices of educators.

Commission members endorse the increasing attention to literature in the curriculum, but fear that literature is too narrowly conceived by some as fiction only, or restricted to what appears in anthologies, thus limiting students' experiences with a wide range of print and other media.

The Commission celebrates the increasing integration of the curriculum evident especially in the elementary and middle schools, and occasionally in the high schools, but we are concerned with the potential reduction of literature's role. If allowed to become a handmaiden to other content areas, or little more than source material with which to teach isolated skills and phonics, then literature will lose its own integrity and students will be denied the rich aesthetic experiences literature provides.

The Commission on Curriculum recognizes the growing tension between teaching skills in isolation and integrating language arts skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing). We are particularly concerned about the use of "balance" in designing curriculum and promoting instructional materials when the term suggests adopting a politically safe stance and circumventing decisions about important philosophical and pedagogical issues. Such emphasis on harmony often results in a search for surface-level compromises that indiscriminately embrace opposing points of view. We endorse "balance" when it invites the use of a variety of instructional strategies within a theoretically consistent view of language and learning.

The Commission applauds the renewed attention to language, but fears that it will once again become little more than drill in usage and mechanics rather than a broader study that includes the political, social, and psychological dimensions of language. Both teachers and students need to remain aware that language study is more than instruction in avoiding error, that it involves

attention to such matters as purpose and audience; gender; power; and individual, social, and cultural identity.

Members of the Commission believe that every student deserves a quality education, and we are deeply concerned that budget cuts restrict the development and implementation of informed curriculum. Curriculum should reflect high standards of performance from each student, providing equal opportunities for rigorous learning and achievement. It should avoid programs of study and standards which privilege one group of students over others. We worry about the inappropriate imposition of business values, processes, and models on education and condemn the manipulation of curriculum by groups promoting their own economic or ideological interests.

We believe professional development must be an ongoing feature of teacher growth. Although we expect teachers to assume responsibility for their own professional development, schools and districts must provide time, resources, incentives, and an atmosphere of mutual trust in support of their efforts. Quality professional development should reflect best practices aligned with English language arts standards. Professionals need a strong voice in defining their own learning and determining what will promote their students' learning most effectively.

The Commission reaffirms its recognition of the use of authentic assessment embedded in curriculum. However, we are concerned with the burgeoning commercial products that assume the trappings of authentic assessment. These products fail to provide a true portrait of student learning and neglect the substantive information teachers need to guide their work with students. We join other professional organizations in deploring the use of quantitative measures as the sole indicator of student learning.

The Commission on Language (Judith Lindfors, Director) noted the following trends and issues.

1. *Laws mandating specific methodology for elementary and secondary classrooms and teacher education programs.* We need to speak out against moves to reduce teachers' professional autonomy. For example, we need to oppose legal mandates (e.g., state laws) which impose phonics instruction (e.g., in California); require that phonics be taught in teacher education programs; require IEPs for Special Education students; and prohibit the use of dialog journals in classrooms.

2. *Language study in the classroom.* Teachers are asking how to integrate discussions of language into communicative classrooms. The Commission on Language urges them to explore the full potential of language study both as a tool for better understanding reading, composition, speaking and listening as well as a tool for better understanding themselves and how they construct their place in their world. Language study is a dynamic exploration of issues concerning language, including word study, grammar, variations in language (both dialectal and register), critical reading, and power and equity issues. Such language study cannot simply deal with language form, but must centrally

deal with the creation of meaning. NCTE should encourage members to develop model and examples of such language teaching.

3. *Exclusion of controversial issues from oral and written classroom discussion.* Increasingly, controversial issues are excluded from oral and written discussion in classrooms. We need to reverse this trend, attempting to (a) intentionally include controversial issues into oral and written classroom discourse; (b) assure that students have the right to their own opinions (even when they differ from the teacher's); (c) enable students to make informed decisions (without imposing choices). We must open the classroom door to any issues of interest or concern to students.

4. *The student's right to read, write, speak, and listen to material of their choice, including content of their choice, as well as linguistically, politically, culturally, generationally different voices.* Students should have the freedom to exercise their right to access, think about, read, speak, write and listen to voices from a variety of sources, including their own language and cultural perspective, whenever they choose, without fear of degradation. Educators and the general public must be made aware of their continuing responsibility to respect students' rights to make these choices.

The Commission on Literature (Carol Jago, Director) sees a growing emphasis on standards in both the schools and in public discourse about education. We support this movement in the teaching of literature as long as the IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts are kept at the forefront of the discussion. Among those standards, elaborated in various NCTE documents, are these items:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.

The Commission is concerned that in the rush to raise academic standards society may penalize those children who, through no fault of their own, have not been adequately prepared to meet them. The traditional mental image of standard is one of a crossbar, a barrier that students must break through if they are to be deemed proficient, a finish line of sorts. But the first definition of standard in the Oxford English Dictionary describes a standard as "a flag, sculptured figure, or other conspicuous object raised on a pole to indicate the rallying point of an army; the distinctive ensign of a king, commander, nation or city." Replacing the old image with this one might help to make the trend toward academic standards a national rallying point. When children are not making the progress we expect, resources would be marshaled to make sure that they do.

It is not until the tenth entry for standard in the Oxford English Dictionary that a reader comes to "an authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection or some definite degree of quality." Identifying exemplars in education is easy; the difficult part is making sure all students have what they need to be able to achieve them.

(To order a copy of the NCTE/IRA *Standards for English Language Arts* or obtain information about related standards documents, call 800-328-9645, ext. 235)

The Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller, Director) notes a growing public concern and discussion of the ethics and impact of the media on various American institutions, ranging from the family to the legal, educational, and political systems. Worries about the long-term cultural effects of media--especially television representations of violence, obscenity, and sexuality--upon the attitudes and behaviors of young people have led to proposals for a rating system for television programming similar to that used in motion pictures, and the installation of technologies to block unwanted programs from the home.

In education, teachers are beginning to realize that a generation reared on television, video games, and computers comes to school with different frames of reference, verbal skills, and thought patterns than those raised primarily on speech and print, and requires different pedagogies to develop their intellectual abilities.

Likewise, the recent Presidential and Congressional elections, so geared to the demands of television broadcasting, both news and advertising, have intensified concerns about whether major domestic and foreign policy issues have become lost in photo opportunities, attack advertisements, and the fund-raising needed to pay for them. The level of voter apathy suggests a need to reconsider how the nation elects officials.

The various civil and child custody trials involving O. J. Simpson continue to dominate tabloid news and talk programs, albeit with added insight about the effect that the **lack** of television coverage has upon the execution of justice. Lastly, the coverage of the Summer Olympics in Atlanta raised concerns about the domination of commercial priorities over the formatting of the sports and games themselves. The related events surrounding the involvement of Richard Jewell in the bombing at the Atlanta games sparked serious questions about the average citizen's right to privacy and assumption of innocence until proven guilty in a trial. Jewell suffered media leaks, sensational coverage, and press ambushes that made his life wretched and led subsequently to settlements from media organizations and apologies from government agencies.

Ironically, much of this discussion of media ethics and impact, and finger pointing, was undertaken by elements of one medium attacking another in sensationalized efforts to bolster circulation or viewing audiences. Meanwhile, tabloid print and television journalism continued their excesses, media conglomerates expanded and controlled a wider range of outlets, public radio and television become more dependent on business donations, C-span lost access to cable systems in competition with commercial interests for channels, major marketing outlets became

censors of media products for fear of offending shoppers, and television stations pre-empted controversial programs--either from fear of antagonizing powerful audiences or politicians, or in order to broadcast more lucrative advertising. Channel One continued its commercial invasion of schools too poor or parsimonious to resist the temptation of free electronic equipment. School children were assaulted with ads for products available for sale in the schools themselves. Likewise, the Internet, the delight of all who value public access and freedom of expression, became subject to increased calls for censorship of sites deemed inappropriate for children or subject to commercial exploitation and misinformation.

Not all developments were so bothersome. Television and film once again revealed their ability to encourage reading and thoughtful discussion. Oprah Winfrey used a book club format to feature important contemporary writers like Toni Morrison with remarkable impact upon book sales readership. Film versions of novels by Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen, and Henry James, and plays by William Shakespeare reintroduced general audiences to the literary canon. The Internet continued to gain subscribers who increasingly combined print, aural, and graphic communication in their creation of web sites. E-mail reinforced the continuing reliance of modern civilization on reading and writing. In a time when school and public libraries struggle to purchase and house periodicals and books, students became excited by the research opportunities the Internet provides. Media literacy became increasingly a concern of educators when organizations like NCTE and the International Reading Association stressed such skills in their *Standards* publications, and commercial publishers and broadcasters provided more books and programs outlining major concepts and pedagogies for teachers. Several states adopted their own standards for language arts that include media literacy as a central component.

Nevertheless, for media literacy to become an integral part of the language arts curriculum a number of matters need development. of primary importance is the pre- and in-service training of language arts teachers at all levels. Colleges and universities need to make media literacy, not just the operation of new technologies, an integral part of teacher preparation programs. Veteran teachers need workshops that focus on media literacy concepts and demonstrate successful methodologies. Too often, the primary concern is the issue of censorship of certain films or television programs, not ways to analyze them. Above all, viewing activities need to cease being time-fillers or rewards; rather, they should be subjects of active classroom instruction. This approach is only possible when schools have adequate funding for purchases of televisions, VCRs, computers, and related equipment so that they can avoid the commercial strings that often accompany corporate donations. In that light, teachers need to be especially wary of all special interest groups who use the label of "media literacy" to insert their materials and ideology into school curricula.

Because the issue of censorship will not disappear, producers of electronic, recording, and film media need to make for school use versions of software, songs, films and programs that eliminate the obscene language, explicit sex, or graphic violence that often make important teachable works unsuitable for the classroom. At the same time schools need to develop policies that do not slavishly follow the Motion Picture Association and other codes but allow teachers to present material based on the maturation levels of students and the purposes of the particular

class. English language arts textbooks need to contain materials and assignments that build upon students' knowledge of non-print media and encourage them to think critically about what they view in cinemas and on television or listen to on recordings and radio. Furthermore, students need more opportunities to create their own media representations beyond traditional essays.

Copyright law as it applies to education needs to be liberalized to reduce restrictive rules that often force teachers to break the law in order to enhance their teaching. States need to issue policy statements that distinguish among relevant federal, state, and school district regulations involving copyright. Finally, colleges and universities need to recognize media literacy courses, often offered by high schools as 11th and 12th grade electives, as valid language arts preparation for admission to higher education.

As is so often the case in times of great change in the way a society communicates its ideas, entertainment, and business, the late 20th Century is filled with both frustration and opportunity. Like earlier generations that sought to develop print literacy as a basis for full citizenship, advocates of media literacy seek a similar universality in the citizenry for like purposes. Slowly American educators are grasping that the new media demand new ways of educating children in the language arts skills needed to think critically and contribute fully in the 21st Century. It is crucial that these media not become the province of any one segment of this society but remain a marketplace to which all members have access and the means to participate.

The Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire, Director) adopts a proactive stance towards and commitment to work on four major issues that we believe warrant ongoing critical examination, reflection and action: 1) support for public schooling; 2) professional development of teachers; 3) informed discussion about reading, theory, research and practice in the national and professional conversation; 4) understanding the complex intersections among race, class, gender and language in reading, literacy curriculum, and practices in mainstream, bilingual multicultural communities.

The Commission continues to be concerned about the rhetoric and unprecedented barrage of criticism leveled against public schools and teachers. These criticisms have been paraded in the media in ways that supposedly educate the public. However, along with the current cacophony of blame in the rhetoric of schools' ineffectiveness, declining standards, and poor student achievement comes a panoply of "quick fix" prescriptions that mislead and misguide rather than inform and ensure the active involvement of all students in their learning. We plan to sponsor a follow up session to the 1996 Manufactured Consent symposium at the 1997 convention to address some of these issues. Our proposed session "In Defense of Public Education" will take the form of a Town Hall meeting and include multiple constituencies in the debate. We also plan to work on an ongoing basis on more effective ways in which we can communicate with parents and educate colleagues and the general public about key issues in reading, especially in the areas of reading assessment and multiple literacies.

The Commission affirms the ongoing need for and commitment to the professional development

of teachers. We must develop advocacy models and supportive roles to help teachers in their day-to-day work, to help them meet new and increasing challenges, and to empower them to take political action in addressing issues of equity and social justice and in dealing with the constraints they face in accomplishing their goals. We believe that the professional development of teachers is everybody's responsibility.

The Commission sees the need for more informed discussion about theoretical and practical issues of reading education--issues that include the cultural, economic and political basis of our own reading as professionals and our students' reading. We plan to sponsor a session at the 1997 convention on Reading Redefined involving multiple constituencies with vested interests in reading, e.g. teachers, parents, administrators, student and other individuals from the larger community. Where has reading been? Where is it going? What is our best thinking about the teaching of reading? What does it mean to teach a child to read in the 21st century? What does it mean to become a critical, engaged and strategic reader in the 21st century?

The Commission continues to be concerned that issues of race, class and gender, language and multiple literacies seem to be restricted to or only addressed within the Rainbow Strand at the annual convention and that these sessions are rarely attended by mainstream teachers. We strongly believe that these issues need to become embedded in our conversations at all levels. In addition to conference venues for examining issues, we propose to sponsor a Critical Educators Series in which key issues like race, class, gender, bilingual education can be critically debated, examined and presented within a coherent and dialogic framework. The involvement of new players and competing voices in the educational arena raises fundamental questions about education, the survival of public schooling, and what governs people's thinking about what schools and teachers ought or not ought to be doing not only in terms of reading but also in terms of writing, language, curriculum, literature and media. The simple explanations that have caught the public's attention must be replaced with a more deliberative inquiry and informed discussion of what it means to read, to be literate, to be a learner, to be a productive citizen today and tomorrow.

The Commission on Reading strongly believes that "quick fixes" to perceived reading, literacy or school problems, such as teaching more phonics, returning to the basics, creating more testing or even creating charter schools won't guarantee a nation of readers who read critically and willingly; nor will they meet the needs of the diverse populations of students in schools, nor ensure new learning possibilities, real or imagined. The challenges are real and the debates do matter. What metaphors will we live, engage, sustain as what Kenneth Burkes calls "our equipment for living"? Will they be petty or grand, inclusive or exclusive, controlling or empowering, manipulating or signifying integrity and respect of self and others?

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