

Tension on the Rope: English in 1962

IN her books about the South Seas, Margaret Mead describes various cultures comparatively free from the tensions and anxieties that confront us in ours. In many ways these carefree civilizations seem not unlike the fabled paradises of Cinerama, yet they produce little art, no literature, and few great products of permanent human worth. One result of freedom from disquieting concern is freedom from caring deeply enough about anything to strive for great achievement. According to Mead, anxiety and tension in any culture rise in direct proportion to concern over fundamental issues and goals. "Why else hitch our wagon to a star," she writes, "save for the tension on the rope!"

The tension on the English rope is everywhere evident today. Seldom have parents and teachers been more concerned about the discrepancy between means and ends, between what we are doing and what we want to do. At every educational level, from the primary to the graduate school, we find teachers of English engaged in a vigorous reassessment of content; methods and goals. Unlike the recent great awakenings in the sciences and modern languages, the upsurge of interest in English seems to stem less from new knowledge and methods or from the needs of national defense—important as are all three—than from a con-

certed and determined effort by today's regional and national leaders in English to create the needed reexamination.

Whether teachers of the English language arts in the elementary school or teachers of English literary criticism in the college, individuals are meeting together as teachers of English in committee, commission, conference and convention to face their common problems. Seldom in the history of American education has greater impetus for curricular reform been more firmly rooted among the subject specialists themselves.

What Are the Trends?

In what direction is the present reassessment taking us? Here we can discuss only three significant trends.

1. *The content of English is being redefined and new priorities are being established to guide instruction at every level.*

The once widely echoed statement that English has no content is seldom heard today. Nor is the slogan, "Every teacher a teacher of English," apt to awaken support, especially if it seems to suggest that specialists in English are not required. More and more teachers are beginning to talk about the core of English instruction to be found in the study of language, literature and composition—terms inter-

preted of course to mean somewhat different emphases at different instructional levels. For example, at the elementary level, and to an extent later, the language content must necessarily include the use of language in reading and speech.

In the secondary school, study of the history and structure of the language becomes increasingly important. Through such clarifications teachers of English are trying to distinguish that which is permanent in English instruction from that which is peripheral and superficial. Such teachers are beginning to explore sequences of curriculum planning which make English instruction increasingly developmental, cumulative and incremental. At the elementary level, no less than at the secondary, units of instruction focused on the content of English are becoming increasingly important. Indeed the notion that elementary teachers should plan some "English units," in addition to "social studies units" or "science units" is a concept which will be explored rather fully in the years immediately ahead.

If the central purpose of education in our times is to teach students how to think, as the Educational Policies Commission now asserts, then the teachers of the English language must play a role in education that is second to none, for it is through language largely that most of us learn to discipline our thought and feeling. Indeed in our culture, thinking and language become so closely identified that the two probably cannot be separated. Clearly the national trend to place greater stress on the intellectual aspects of education is inevitably leading schools to recognize the centrality of English, the "bedrock" subject on which learning in most other areas is necessarily based.

2. Concern over the preparation of secondary and elementary teachers in English is prompting a massive reassessment of present preparatory programs.

Just a year ago the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a report to the profession calling attention to glaring deficiencies in the preparation of today's secondary and elementary teachers in English. Supervisors have long been aware of the deplorable conditions under which English is sometimes taught. What NCTE supplied was factual evidence based on authoritative data obtained from the chairmen of college English departments and the deans of education. Even those of us who have been working recently in classrooms saw the findings as somewhat hair-raising: 40 to 60 percent of today's secondary English teachers without majors in the subject; only 39 percent of those with college English majors completing a single course in advanced composition; an even smaller percentage having studied English grammar; half of today's elementary teachers without study in the English language, in grammar and usage, language development, or methods of teaching language to children. The committee preparing the report flatly asserted that half of the English majors being graduated today are not adequately prepared to teach English and clearly charged that the basic responsibility for reform rested with college English departments.

The outcry of press and public was predictable. Less well known, perhaps, are developments indicating that reform is under way. During 1961-62, the NCTE will publish a major volume on the education of elementary, secondary, and college teachers of English, presenting the results of its seven-year study of teacher

education programs. The imaginative plans of the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board not only will help retrain 900 secondary teachers in 20 colleges next summer, but because the courses will be offered as graduate English courses, they offer a wedge to awaken 20 English departments to the need.

Project English of the U. S. Office of Education, although presently without Congressional authority to mount an institute program, is earmarking funds for special research projects in English and for seminars and curriculum tryout centers. During the past year, more and more chairmen of college English departments have been meeting to assess their own responsibilities. During December's convention of the Modern Language Association, a panel of department heads publicly considered the implications of some of these recent developments for college teachers of English.

Greater assumption of responsibility by college English professors in no way lessens the responsibilities of the specialists in English education or the professors of elementary education. But those who have long worked to solve the problems of public education must display reasonable patience with their colleagues from the liberal arts; above all, professors of education cannot expect their newly found friends in academic departments to develop overnight insights into the complexities of education which they themselves acquired only after many years. In English this new cooperation between departments presages better, jointly planned preparation for tomorrow's teachers.

3. *Much of the leadership in the current curriculum movement in English is emerging from professional associations of English teachers.*

At a time when the united efforts of elementary, secondary, and college specialists in English are vitally important, English teachers are fortunate that they are members of a strong national organization with informed, articulate leadership at all three levels. The NCTE, bringing together the professional leaders and scholars from all levels and aspects of English teaching, has also demonstrated sufficient flexibility to work with other professional and learned societies on matters of mutual concern. The Council has worked with the Modern Language Association, for example, in areas involving literary scholarship and college teaching; with the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification on problems of certification. With ASCD, the Council shares not only a mutual interest in curriculum development but also the historic fact that both organizations originated largely from the work of one man, James F. Hosis.

The ability of English teachers to work with other groups may soon be severely tested, for if the English specialists are themselves the only really qualified group to redefine their own content, they also have much to learn from others about the processes of learning and the nature of human growth. Somehow in moving toward a new curriculum, English teachers must steer between the Scylla of too little learning process and the Charybdis of too much.

Some of the projects on which affiliated organizations of the NCTE are working demonstrate the extent of the involvement of professional subject organizations. The Nebraska Council of Teachers of English, for example, is developing a statewide curriculum project in English designed to bring about an articulated English program for grades 1-12. Fi-

nanced in part by funds from a local foundation, the Nebraska Council called a special two-week institute in the summer of 1961 to prepare curricular reports and to develop plans for trying out instructional materials in the schools. Next June the council there hopes to arrange for special summer institutes to prepare teachers for the program.

The Western Pennsylvania Association of Teachers of English is studying the relation of linguistics to the teaching of English. With the help of a local foundation, the association last fall held a special short linguistics workshop for teachers. Both the South Dakota and Oklahoma councils are engaged in statewide curriculum projects planned in cooperation with their state departments of education.

In Wisconsin, the state council has involved more than 300 classroom teachers in a curriculum study project that is largely conducted by mail. Similar projects are under way in other areas. Such regional developments are especially fruitful in that they can be closely re-

lated to the special needs and problems of the locale; they should also reassure those who worry unnecessarily about a single national curriculum.

The tension on the English rope has seldom been more severe. Only a few of the strains have been described herein. The symposium of articles in this issue of *Educational Leadership* presents still other considerations.

If we can view the present ferment, the present concern, the present anxiety about the teaching of the English language arts as an indication of deep-seated public and professional belief in the importance of what we do, and thus an indication of basic strength, then many of the new projects and proposals can be recognized as steps toward better programs, rather than as threats to all that seems tested and familiar. Why else hitch our wagon to a star save for the tension on the rope? Why else indeed!

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Curriculum Materials 1962

Questions about courses of study often can be answered through examples included in this publication. All instructional materials found in the Curriculum Bulletins display at the 17th Annual ASCD Conference are listed in this catalog.

Available in February 1962

Price: \$1.25

Can be purchased at the ASCD Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada, March 4-8 or write to

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
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