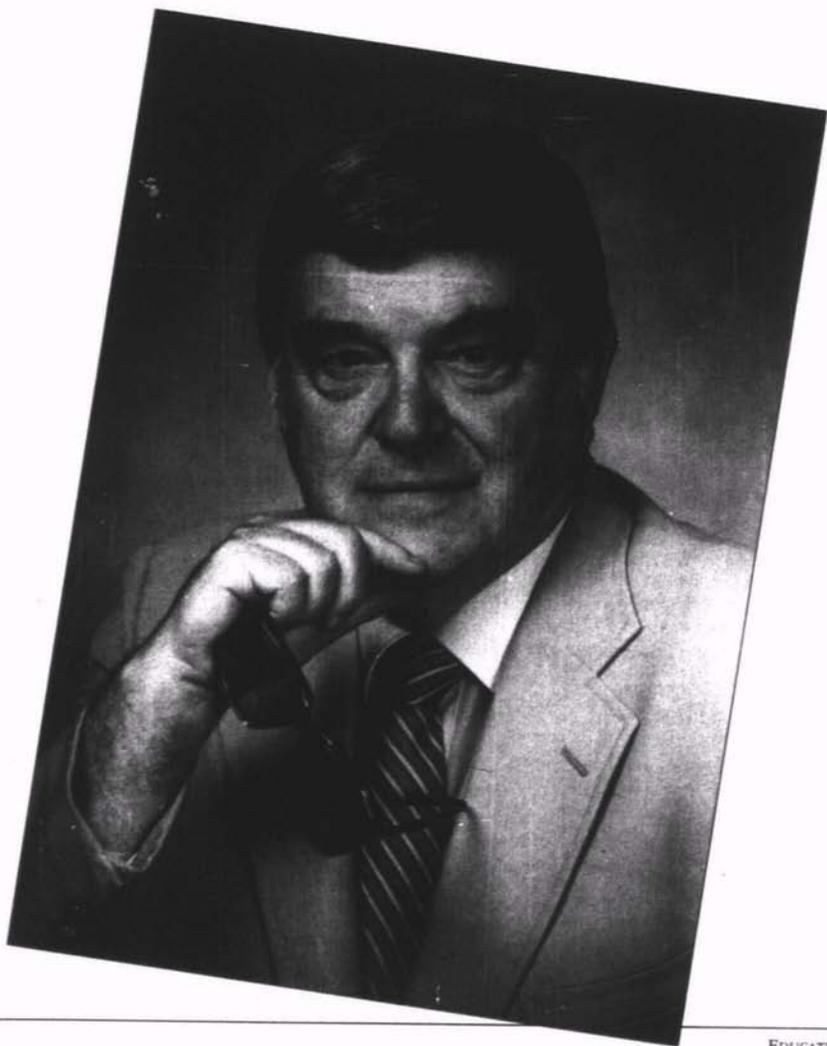


What Schools Should Teach in the English Language Arts



The author of several books on curriculum, including ASCD's *Curriculum Renewal*, Allan Glatthorn taught English for 20 years and has been doing curriculum work for another 20. Here, in response to the 1988 ASCD yearbook and other recent publications, he makes specific recommendations for the content of the English "mastery curriculum," grades 5-12.

For years I have resisted the temptation to offer content recommendations for the English curriculum, since I have always been strongly committed to the importance of locally developed curriculums that reflect substantial input from teachers. However, three developments suggest that some prescriptive advice is needed, if only to correct an obvious imbalance. The first is the publication of Secretary Bennett's (1987) *James Madison High School*, which in my view is much too conservative in its orientation. The second is the publication of Charles Suhor's (1988) chapter in the recent ASCD yearbook; his recommendations seem narrow in perspective and radical in thrust. And the third is the continued reluctance of the National Council of Teachers of English to offer specific recommendations about content. (Mandel's monograph published by NCTE in 1980 does present three general models and can profitably be consulted by curriculum committees.)

In trying to redress the present imbalance, I would like to accomplish three related tasks: provide a rationale

for the recommendations, offer general guidelines for each strand or area of the curriculum, and provide specific content recommendations.

A Rationale for the Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are

characterized by four features: they are limited in the grade levels included, they focus on mastery; they deal only with the scope of the curriculum, and they emphasize renewal.

First, these recommendations are limited to the curriculum for grades 5-12. For earlier grades I recommend

No Shortage of Ideas: A Reply to Glatthorn

Charles Suhor

I welcome the opportunity to clarify the matter of recommendations from NCTE about curriculum content. Glatthorn is correct in saying that NCTE offers few specific recommendations about content, if "recommendations" means *official position statements*. NCTE is a forum for various viewpoints, and its members are understandably reluctant to pass a large number of official resolutions endorsing particular content. But books published by the Council (not to mention innumerable articles in its journals) include highly specific ideas about content, from critiques of grammar study to booklists for elementary and high school students. There is a shortage of imprimaturs, then, but no shortage of ideas for curriculum developers who want to weigh varied options for the content of K-12 English curriculums. I won't comment on Glatthorn's views of my own content recommendations, beyond suggesting that readers look at the current ASCD yearbook and consider both the range of those recommendations and coin-of-the-realm usage of the term *radical* in relation to my proposals.

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a *whole language* curriculum. In general a whole language approach (1) provides a literate environment that stimulates and supports the use of language; (2) integrates language arts skills and knowledge by requiring their use in real situations; (3) emphasizes the pupil's own oral language; (4) uses children's literature to develop an interest in reading and broaden reading horizons; and (5) stresses the functional uses of language. (For a fuller explication of the whole language approach, see Fillion and Brause 1987 and Hansen 1987.) A whole language approach for these grades does not seem to require a structured curriculum; it does entail well-trained teachers, good materials, and supportive leadership.

The study of grammar does not need to be defended on solely utilitarian grounds. The structure of one's language is knowledge worth knowing, even though it cannot be used.

Second, the recommendations deal chiefly with the *mastery* curriculum. As I conceptualize the curriculum, it embraces four components. The *mastery* curriculum meets two criteria: it has high structure; it is essential for all students. (*All* in this sense means all students except those with serious learning disabilities or extremely limited verbal skills—perhaps 10 percent of the students in our comprehensive schools.) The *organic* curriculum has low structure but is also essential for all students. A curricular objective such as "enjoy poetry" is a part of the organic curriculum; it is nurtured every time a poem is studied, not assigned to a particular grade level. The *team-planned* curriculum has high structure but includes only enrichment content. The *student-determined* curriculum has low structure and also includes only enrichment content. (For a fuller explanation of these concepts, see my 1987 works.)

My recommendations here, therefore, deal primarily with the mastery curriculum. (I offer some suggestions for the other three components solely to round out the picture.) The mastery curriculum is a curriculum considered basic or essential for all students. It includes only the structured part of that basic curriculum; and it is the curriculum that will have objectives, tests, and texts. For most classes the mastery curriculum in English should not take more than 70 percent of the time available, allowing ample time for the other three components. Finally, the mastery curriculum is that part of the curriculum that the school district owns; the classroom teachers own the organic and the team-planned; the students, the student-determined.

Next, the content recommendations offered here deal only with the scope of the curriculum. Because of space limitations, I do not consider issues of sequence here.

Finally, the recommendations are offered in a spirit of curriculum renewal. As I use the term, *curriculum renewal* connotes incremental improvement of the curriculum, not radical transformation. It is based upon a

The specification of mastery content is only the first phase of a complex curriculum development process.

teacher-centered process—one that provides for substantial teacher input into curriculum decision making, respects the knowledge of experienced teachers, and challenges them to strengthen the curriculum so that it responds to the needs of today's youth. (For a fuller description of a process for renewing the mastery curriculum in English, see my 1980 publication.)

General Guidelines for the Mastery Strands

As I conceptualize it, the English curriculum includes six strands: literature, language, composition, speaking and listening, critical thinking, and vocabulary development. The *strands*, as I use the term, are the horizontal elements of a scope and sequence chart; they are the areas of the curriculum that are emphasized from grade to grade. Taken together, they constitute the scope of the curriculum. This delineation of the separate strands is intended only to facilitate curriculum planning and development, not to suggest separate instructional treatment; in much of their unit and lesson planning, teachers probably will want to integrate two or more of these strands.

Literature

The mastery curriculum in literature includes basic concepts, the major classics, and some special units. The basic concepts are relatively few—only those essential ones important in understanding and communicating about literature. Note that such less

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essential concepts as *alliteration*, *onomatopoeia*, and *denouement* are excluded; these and other more complex concepts can be dealt with in the team-planned curriculum, if teachers wish.

The classics include a small number of literary works that are considered an essential part of our cultural heritage. The argument here is that all students should have a meaningful experience with great works of the past. For more able students, that meaningful experience will primarily involve close reading and analysis. For less verbal students, it will involve such alternative activities as reading only key scenes and passages; viewing films or videotapes; hearing the teacher read parts aloud; dramatizing some of the scenes; and reading summaries of plots. Such an approach to the classics is intended to enable all students to experience these works in some significant way that makes a difference to them; it is something between a dreary line-by-line (or chapter-by-chapter) analysis and the literary name-dropping recommended by Hirsch (1987). The special units are provided to correct the male, white, European bias of the classics and to reflect the changing nature of our society.

A word should be said about the particular classics recommended here. My intent has been to suggest works that are readily available to and known by most teachers. Others, obviously, would propose different works; therefore, this is an issue where teacher input is especially important.

The organic literature curriculum should emphasize two important outcomes: to enjoy literature and to read literature to understand oneself and others. These outcomes should be nurtured every time a literary selection is taught; they do not need to be "scope-and-sequenced." In teaching a literary selection, teachers should try to elicit one or more of these types of response: the *personal* response ("This is how the poem connects with me"), the *descriptive* response ("This is the literal meaning"), the *interpre-*

tive response ("This is what it seems to mean beneath the surface"), the *evaluative* response ("This is how it stacks up as a poem"), and the *creative* response ("This is how it stimulates me to write creatively").

And this mastery literature curriculum should be supplemented by a team-planned component that gives teachers some time to teach their own favorite works and by a student-determined curriculum, where students are encouraged to read widely and enjoy reading without feeling the heavy hand of literary analysis. Or, put simply, Vonnegut should be read, not studied.

Language

The language strand includes grammar and special units. *Grammar* here means "the study of the structure of the language," knowing how adjective clauses function, for example. It is distinguished from *usage*, knowing whether to say "Bob and I" or "Bob and me." Only a small number of essential grammatical concepts are included in the mastery curriculum.

Oral language should be a vital part of every English lesson, and teachers should emphasize on every appropriate occasion the importance of listening courteously, speaking clearly, and being sensitive to the feelings of an audience.

Many experts would exclude even this minimal number of concepts, since knowledge of grammar does not help a student speak, write, or read. However, there are several practical arguments for including grammar: most teachers think it is important; most administrators and parents want it emphasized; a knowledge of some grammatical terms helps teachers and students talk about writing and literature. However, the study of grammar does not need to be defended on solely utilitarian grounds. The structure of one's language is knowledge worth knowing, even though it cannot be used. (Why is it that science and math teachers never have to apologize for teaching the technical language of their disciplines?)

The special units are designed to help the student escape the trap of linguistic ethnocentrism: understand the changing nature of language, understand that there are no "funny" or "strange" languages, value one's own dialect, accept the dialects of others, avoid sexism in language. The teaching of usage should be individualized; the teacher should correct only those usages that unfortunately stigmatize the speaker. (In the eyes of God and linguists, all dialects are equal; in the eyes of many employers, only the speech of the educated middle class is acceptable.)

The organic curriculum in language should emphasize these outcomes: enjoy using language, appreciate the wonder of language, value one's own language, accept the language of others. The team-planned curriculum is left to the teachers; they may wish to add more grammar or include additional units in language study, such as lexicography or slang.

Writing

The mastery curriculum in writing should provide all students in all grades with a variety of structured writing experiences. The types identified here are ones that make sense to English teachers, even though this analysis is not one that rhetoricians would endorse. *Exposition* includes

The mastery curriculum recommended here includes only the structured part of the basic curriculum; and it is the curriculum that will have objectives, tests, and texts.

all the writing that explains: process analysis, comparison and contrast, definition, and so on. *Persuasion* is audience-focused; it expresses opinions in a manner designed to gain their acceptance by others. *Writing about literature* uses all the responses identified above in the literature strand. *Academic writing* includes term papers, reports, and essay tests. *Practical and applied writing* includes business letters, résumés, application forms, and social notes. *Personal and creative writing* includes short stories, monologs, dialogs, character sketches, journals, and personal essays.

The organic writing curriculum emphasizes a flexible use of the writing process and writing for self-expression. Every time they teach writing, teachers should emphasize the importance of writing as a means of communication, the need to find one's personal voice, and the value of being sensitive to an audience.

Speaking and Listening

Speaking and listening are vitally important; but, as I conceptualize the curriculum, they should be dealt with primarily through the organic curriculum. Oral language should be a vital part of every English lesson, and teach-

ers should emphasize on every appropriate occasion the importance of listening courteously, speaking clearly, and being sensitive to the feelings of an audience. The folly of treating speaking and listening through a mastery approach is illustrated in this objective taken from a 9th grade curriculum guide published by one of the state offices: "maintain eye contact with audience." Is that applicable only for 9th grade? And how do you measure that objective in a curriculum-referenced test?

However, a few structured mastery units are probably required, to ensure that students learn the more complex oral communication skills that do not develop naturally.

Critical Thinking

The mastery units in critical thinking focus on the thinking skills especially important in English. The critical *listening* unit emphasizes the importance of listening critically to speakers trying to sell a product, a candidate, or a point of view. The critical *reading* unit focuses on the intelligent reading of newspapers, magazines, and advertisements. The critical *viewing* unit helps students become more discriminating in their viewing of television and films. The *information processing* unit emphasizes these skills: identifying a research question, retrieving information, evaluating information, storing information, synthesizing and applying information to the solution of the problem. The *language and thinking* unit helps students understand how language influences thinking and learn how to detect and avoid linguistic fallacies.

Vocabulary

Like speaking and listening, vocabulary study is treated primarily in the organic curriculum. The teacher should teach words that students need for specific reading and writing assignments, while attempting to instill in students an interest in words and a desire to broaden one's vocabulary. However, a few structured units are included to enable students to de-

Literature

Concepts: simile, metaphor, image, symbol, theme, irony, rhyme, rhythm, character, plot, setting, tragedy, comedy, short story, novel, poem, drama, biography, autobiography, essay.

Classics: Greek and Roman mythology, *Odyssey*, the Bible as literature, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*, *Julius Caesar*, *Great Expectations*, *Macbeth*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Oedipus Rex*.

Special units: Voices of Women, The Black Experience, Literature of the East, Hispanic Voices.

Language

Grammar: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, predicate adjective, predicate noun, linking verb, transitive verb, verb *be*, intransitive verb, participial phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective clause, adverb clause, sentence.

Special units: Language Change, Languages of the World, History of the American Language, History of the English Language, The Dialects We Speak, Sexism in Language.

Writing

Types of writing: exposition, persuasion, writing about literature, academic writing, practical and applied writing, personal and creative writing.

Speaking and Listening

Special units: Group Discussion Skills, Presenting the Class Report, The Job Interview, The College Interview.

Critical Thinking

Special units: Critical Listening, Critical Reading, Critical Viewing, Critical Use of the Mass Media, Information Processing, Language and Thinking.

Vocabulary Development

Special units: Using Context Clues, Using Roots and Prefixes to Unlock Meaning, Taking Vocabulary Tests.

Fig. 1. A Mastery Curriculum, English Language Arts, Grades 5-12

velop general vocabulary skills. These units can be supplemented with the direct teaching of words carefully selected for their frequency and difficulty. Such direct teaching of vocabulary is an effective complement to teaching words in context (see, for example, Stahl and Fairbanks 1986).

Content Not Included

It should be noted that some content usually included in English curriculum guides is excluded here from the mastery curriculum. First, the systematic study of punctuation is not included. Teachers should teach the punctuation marks that students need to use in their writing and correct any egregious punctuation mistakes that call attention to themselves or interfere with meaning. In addition, they should analyze the standardized tests used in their district and at appropriate grade levels teach any items included in those tests.

Spelling is not included for similar reasons. Experts who have reviewed the research on learning to spell recommend three sources of spelling words: words that pupils ask the spelling of, words they misspell in their writing, and words that the teacher knows the pupils will need to know. See Johnson and colleagues (1981) for

an excellent summary of the research on the teaching of spelling.

The Content Recommendations

The content recommendations presented in Figure 1 are intended chiefly to stimulate discussion and provide some initial guidance in the curriculum renewal process. Certain cautions should be noted in reviewing these recommendations. First, as has been emphasized throughout, they include only the mastery concepts and skills; the expectation is that teachers will extend and enrich this content through the team-planned curriculum and give special attention to the important organic outcomes.

Second, the identification of separate strands does not imply that the skills and concepts must be taught separately. It is a relatively simple matter to integrate the mastery content into thematic units. The mastery content can serve also as the foundation for elective courses. Third, the specification of mastery content is only the first phase of a complex curriculum development process. Curriculum leaders should not believe that they can distribute this or similar lists and consider the job done.

Finally, these recommendations are

intended to facilitate input, not pre-empt teacher decision making. Teachers will believe in and therefore implement only a curriculum that reflects their considerable input. In the final analysis, the recommendations that count are theirs. □

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