

in an effort to produce a program of vigor, interest, practicality and challenge.

In addition to this, the Board of Education has seen fit to give extra pay to all of the various department heads, so that there is some remuneration for their efforts in the way of curriculum leadership. I might also say that our English teachers this year are teaching only four hours a day. So we are giving them more time to do individual work and more time to spend with students. Interest in the new English curriculum was also responsible for at least two new teachers' decision to join our faculty this year.

## II.

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This report of our four year English curriculum program is certainly not advanced as a model program. If any of the ideas which have worked for us can be useful to other small schools we will be pleased. But, since the basic tenet of planning such a program is that each school must adapt it to fit its peculiar needs, we urge caution in assuming that situations and experiences will be similar.

Probably our English curriculum study in Cambridge would never have gotten underway had it not been for the nagging of both men and ideas. One of the "nagging" men was our former high school principal, the late Mr. R.B. Ernst. He regularly greeted me in the halls of C.H.S. with the question: "When are you going to do something about the English department?" The other man was Mr. Duane Scribner, then of the staff of Moorhead State College, who blasted my comfortable alibis with information he gave at an MCTE meeting at the University of Minnesota. It was there that I heard about the NCTE check list for the evaluation of the language arts program appearing in the April, 1962, issue of the English Journal. It was there, also, that Mr. Scribner asked his fateful question: "If you haven't started a curriculum study, when are you going to?" Shortly after that, I heard about Project English at the University of Minnesota, and through participating in it as well as the NDEA Institute held at the University two summers later, I finally felt partially equipped to initiate an English curriculum study for grades 7-12 at Cambridge High School. That was four years ago.

Looking back, I think the most important aspect of our four year experience was maintaining the feasibility of the project. First of all, I, as a department chairman, needed to believe it could be done. Moreover, I had to believe it was needed severely enough to be worth all the grief which Mr. Scribner forecast as part of such a program. Secondly, the members of the English department, as well as the school board and administration would have to share these beliefs. All of us agreed that the products of our English language teaching left something to be desired. But what could we do about it? Where would we start? How would we provide for differing opinions in the department? Since none of us felt expert in this field, how would we know that our efforts would prove worthwhile?

The assumptions built into the NCTE check list for evaluation of English programs gave us a set of criteria of excellence for which we have been increasingly grateful. It provided an excellent inductive device for total staff discovery of glaring deficiencies in the program. These weaknesses were evident at all levels, not just a few. The need for personal defensive arguments and the ill will engendered by such arguments were precluded. The project of upgrading the entire program became and continues to be a joint venture.

Once we had convinced ourselves we might, by following the check list step by step, improve our program, two other problems threatened the project's feasibility: time and money. We knew it was useless to ask for the kind of summer workshop program already successful in so many urban and suburban schools. Even if our board could have agreed to finance such a program, we could not interest enough of the staff in staying in Cambridge during the summer to work on such a project. And what about money? At the time, we had a department head who was neither paid for nor given extra time. The thing wasn't feasible. We might as well give up.

During one of the buzz sessions at the University of Minnesota Project English meetings, somebody had given a suggestion. Why not hire lay help on a substitute basis to relieve departmental teachers for curriculum work? We submitted the plan to the school board. A list of qualified lay people was compiled for us by our local branch of the AAUW. Lay people were contacted and were enthusiastic about the idea. The Cambridge English department, grades 7-12, plus a representative of the elementary school were released every other Friday for one hour to work on curriculum. We were in business. True, the pay situation was not ideal. The lay helpers were paid, but the teachers were not. In

spite of this fact, most of the staff not only made great efforts to help in the initial stages of curriculum appraisal and revision, but also worked three times as long in preparation for the released hour as the hour itself. One cannot expect such initial dedication to maintain itself, however. The next year, since our plan had worked so well, the board decided to use it for a curriculum study in another department. It was also decided that we would continue our study after school. Needless to say, the study ground to a screeching halt.

This time, when we approached the school board, at least we had the results of the year's work to show, and the vision of a possible, but unaccomplished program to present. The board agreed to provide, for the first time in the history of Cambridge, a week's paid curriculum study at the end of the school year. This forty hour session was highly productive, and this time the teachers themselves were paid for their work. The fourth year of the study we were unable to assemble the staff during even one week of the summer; therefore we substituted regular Saturday morning sessions for which the teachers were again paid. Our school board at present recognizes that curriculum revision and improvement is a continuing process and a responsibility of the school itself. We now feel that the problems of time and money for such a program will never be insurmountable as long as the board, the administration, and the staff can work out their problems cooperatively.

What procedure did we follow in revising curriculum? Here again, we used the trial and error method. We reasoned that we had very little time in which to work, that the sooner we could get something down on paper, the sooner we could change, correct, improve. We realized that the initial discussions of philosophy can become delayed in semantic polemic. Since the assumption of "correct" answers to the NCTE checklist of questions comprised a philosophy in itself, we decided to adopt it temporarily, plan our program around it, try it, and then decide to accept or reject it. We then decided we could only attempt one aspect of the check list at a time. Since our teachers had been teaching in almost complete isolation, one of the crying needs was to discover what was being taught. We arbitrarily started with literature. We obtained a large roll of newsprint and enumerated selections taught, grades 7-12, left to right. When we attached this chart to two walls of the small room in which we met, we were amazed at the glaringly apparent overlap. We were, for example, teaching the same poem at four

different levels! Currently, a permanent feature of our written curriculum study is an "overlap" page on which are listed problem selections and placement recommendations arrived at by the entire staff. This page is revised annually.

From this initial analysis of our teaching of literature have come, for us, far reaching changes. We now have planned studies in the field of mythology, grades 7-12; we are making efforts to use multi-level materials aimed at student independent reading skill development; we are systematically determining the reading level of the selections which we teach; we are making an effort to match the child's reading ability with the selections taught; we are making greater use of paperback books and mass media coordination. Professional materials to aid the slow reader are now used sequentially. A film library in the humanities was purchased in cooperation with three other schools in the area. Recently, we revised our program for greater coordination with social studies, into an American emphasis in tenth grade and world emphasis in eleventh. In 1968 we hope to provide from four to seven possible areas of elective courses for our twelfth graders. From the initial selection-oriented literature program, we have moved to the more flexible student oriented thematic unit program. These units emphasize the behavior aspect of language study. We are indebted for many of our ideas to the University of Minnesota High School and Project English. We are also indebted to the Language Arts Consultant of the State Department of Education, Mr. Gerald Kincaid, and to our superintendent, Mr. Melvin Norsted, for their aid and guidance. Although we have gained many ideas from other curriculum studies which we have been able to buy, from discussions at professional meetings, from summer school sessions and from professional articles, most of our ideas have come from the staff members themselves who, each year, discuss, evaluate, suggest, revise and implement new developments. These revisions are gathered together during the summer by the department head and are printed in the new booklet.

We have many problems. We need a better program to take care of the needs of the slow reader. We need a consistent vocabulary program which produces results. We need a better program to help the poor speller. In spite of the fact that we are trying to teach a language oriented curriculum, language studies are often bypassed by teachers who seem afraid to try new materials. A new series of Saturday morning in-service training sessions is now being planned to help new teachers with unfamiliar materials. They, in turn, should be better



able to evaluate these materials at the end of the year. We now have recommendations concerning both composition and spelling given us by former staff members. It would seem, however, that these recommendations are either too impractical or too obscure, since they have been used very little. The problem of presenting material succinctly enough to be used by bewildered, busy first year teachers is a paramount problem for the small school with its rapid turnover of personnel.

Our gains are encouraging, however. We now have a seventy-five page booklet which seems to be used by our teachers. Academic department chairmen are now paid for their time and given extra time in which to work on department business. Community leaders have participated in our program and are enthusiastic about it. Our teachers seem to be more involved in the total English program and seem to be more inspired by their work. We are better able to provide for individual differences among our students. Our materials are more interesting and varied. We are offering a more comprehensive program. We are duplicating effort less often.

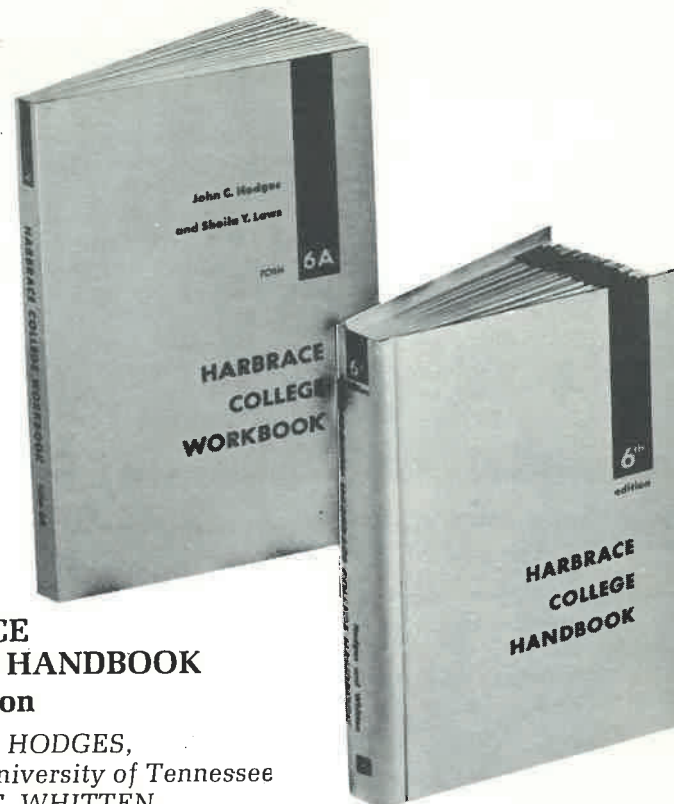
We hope that future tests will prove that our English students are improving in proficiency, understanding, and appreciation of man's use of his own language.

This report was given at the MCTE convention in Rochester in May, 1967.

## A WORD TO THE WISE YOUNG POET

By JOHN HASSLER  
Bemidji State College

Rhyme and reason  
Are out of season.



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