

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE SETTING UP A HUMANITIES PROGRAM

BY MARTIN C. WILTGEN
Mankato High School

Many secondary schools throughout the United States have introduced into their curricula humanities courses as an added elective course in the non-science program of studies. In many instances this has been the only new addition to the non-science curriculum for too many years. Charles R. Keller, former director of the John Hay Fellows Program, states

These courses constitute a needed challenge to the present separate-subject-dominated curriculum. Knowledge is now compartmentalized in the familiar five-classes-a-day, five-days-a-week pattern. Subjects have little relation to one another. Fusion of knowledge, when it does occur, results more from accident than from design. The student's day, week, and year are mad scrambles as he moves from subject to subject, usually learning without being involved, frequently simply overcome by continuous exposure to unrelated subjects. Compartmentalized education may have fitted a more unified era when fewer people had much formal education. It must be questioned in a more complex, atomistic, disjointed period when so many human beings are rootless, mobile, unconcerned about others, and without standards of value. (Charles R. Keller, "The Humanities in Our Schools." A talk given at an Institute for Teachers in the Hamden, Connecticut, schools: January 4, 1966.)

Generally, these humanities courses fall into three types of course structures or combinations of these three. They are most usually centered around the historical, philosophical, or aesthetical approach.

I.

The historically structured humanities course is most generally a class in world civilizations with the emphasis on what has happened to what is happening. Although it is not a history class in the sense of studying political and economic events, it has overtones of a history of cultures course where the socio-ethnic, cultural, and religious aspects of civilizations are

covered.

The organization of the course is chronological and more often than not the program begins with the pre-Greeks and ends with the modern world with its emphasis on Western Man. The major concept desired from such a historically structured humanities program is the knowledge of tradition.

This type of course structure has the advantage of easy organization since it is usually chronological in its approach to each civilization. It is most frequently taught by the lecture and discussion method with accompanied readings. Of course, many other resources such as tapes, transparencies, films, recordings, and slides can be and are utilized to add to the understanding of each culture studied.

The disadvantages of such a course are that it attempts to cover too much in too short a time and that it does very little for the student's capacity to experience his feelings on the subject matter since it is concerned with the accumulation of factual information. It tends to develop the "parrot-complex" in students, the ability to repeat the information programmed into the student.

II.

The philosophically structured humanities course is usually a class in the history of philosophy and the study of philosophical problems with the concern for the student's capacity for reasoning. It is usually a course that is centered around types of philosophy--ethics, logic, epistemology, aesthetics, and metaphysics-- and problems presented in each type, or the study of the "Great Ideas" from the Great Books. The majority of the humanities courses stressing this approach tend to emphasize Western philosophical issues.

This type of class is often a disguised information course and it aims at problems which are basically set up for the class. More frequently than not, a high school course such as this is topically organized; that is, it is centered on specific problems that have always been unanswered. At the high school level a detailed survey of the problems of the types of philosophy is rather difficult for the students; therefore, the problems are centered or topically organized for the students.

The philosophically structured program has the advantage of fairly easy organization as well as the historically structured program. It is fascinating and

challenging for the teacher since it tends to encourage participated involvement on the part of the students. For the high school student and the college freshman it is a very appealing approach because they are at the "self-identity" period in intellectual and emotional growth, and they like to identify themselves with some trend of thought and/or philosophical school.

This type of class is usually taught by the lecture-reading-discussion method which encourages some extremely thought-provoking discussions between the students themselves and the teacher or teachers. However challenging this program can be, it does have the more than probable disadvantage of becoming a vague and watered down course where not much is ever really decided if too much is covered.

III.

The aesthetically structured humanities program is more often than not a highly analytical observation of works of music, art, architecture, literature, and philosophy. The degrees of analysis are usually three-fold: the appreciative level, the interpretive level, and the critical level. Through these degrees of analysis the students acquire the understanding of the specific dimensions of each area necessary for appreciation, interpretation, and criticism. Such a course is basically "experiential"; that is, the students are confronted with the work of art itself through reading, seeing slides and movies of the visual arts, and hearing recordings and/or going to concerts.

The results desired from such a course structure as this are the ability to appreciate, interpret, and criticize works of art; and to develop sensitive and informed analysis of the works studied.

The methods of instruction used in this type of course structure are the demonstration, the lecture, "readings" of works of art, music, and literature, and the lecture-demonstration-discussion.

This type of course structure is difficult to organize because of the problems in selecting works and texts which will best develop the capacity for critical analysis. It has the severe disadvantage of difficulty in finding staff personnel to teach it. Such a class tends to become too analytical where the art form being studied is so dissected as to totally dismember the meaningful unity of the whole art work, and by so doing the purpose of the arts as education and experience is lost. However, if well taught by one teacher or a team, such a course encourages involvement

on the part of the students whereby much is gained.

In addition to the historically, philosophically, and aesthetically structured programs in the humanities there are combinations of all three structures or combinations of two.

IV.

There are, of course, some problems and dangers that ought to be considered in setting up humanities courses. Professor Fred Stocking reviewed present school offerings and advanced what he called four strong opinions concerning the planning of such courses. Each is worth considering carefully:

1. There is no such thing as an ideal course in the humanities for high school students: an excellent course might be designed in any dozen different ways, and the best course for any school exploits the particular talents which are available.

2. The better courses are usually taught by two or more teachers - one from music or art, one from literature, one from history, for instance. But unless there happen to be two or more teachers who share an exuberant desire to work together in such a course, a single energetic and enthusiastic teacher, with diverse interests and a mastery of several disciplines, might well be preferable.

3. The best courses awaken that kind of interest in the humanities which is based on depth of understanding rather than on a glib familiarity with names and titles, or on the social fun of field trips. That is, good courses never make any attempt at coverage. One novel, one painting, and one opera out of the middle of the 19th century might well provide more than enough material for a semester.

4. The goal of such a course should be: first, to arouse interest in the arts as providing experiences valuable for their own sake; second, to show that an art work acquires deeper meaning when placed in its historical context; and third, to make clear that a full understanding of-- and delight in-- any one of the arts requires the eventual mastery of difficult, complicated, and highly rewarding intellectual disciplines. (Fred H. Stocking. "High School Humanities Courses: Some Reservations and Warnings." The English

Whenever a school decides to implement a program of studies in the humanities, the planning staff member or members should keep in mind that they should carefully evaluate the personality of the community and the school and decide precisely what they feel would best suit their particular circumstance. They should ask, "What is it that we feel our students should have?" As a result of having asked this question many schools have different programs in humanities. Another factor which needs serious consideration is the matter of very clear curriculum articulation; that is, of not duplicating a subject area that is already covering certain academic disciplines. As a result of this careful curriculum analysis, some programs in the humanities serve a very important function in the school as being the only interdepartmental course where several disciplines are merged into a meaningful whole for the students.

Schools which have programs in the humanities gear them to the types of students they want in the class. Many of the programs in the humanities are geared for the pre-college and/or accelerated student. The criterion for being in such a humanities class is most generally the grade point average of all subjects or the composite average of English and history. Although programs with the academically elite in them are rich in content, student involvement, and interest, I cannot totally agree with the philosophy of offering the humanities to a selected few. The humanities are the *humAnities*-- for everyone who desires to undertake such study. The main criterion for humanities students should be the desire to take the course.

Those who may shake their heads at this idea need not worry about any resultant watered down program. Although I am not in agreement with homogeneous groupings when it comes to the humanities, such grouping can be done: schedule the more gifted in one group and the "less gifted" (but just as interested) in another group. At the high school level homogeneous groupings sometimes turn into groupings ranging from the "intellectual" group to the "dumb-dumb" group or any other inappropriate labels attached to such groups by students and sometimes by teachers and administrators. To maintain a democratic and/or pluralistic feeling in the humanities heterogeneous grouping is recommended.

Granted the difficulty in staffing for the humanities programs, it need not be an insurmountable problem. What is needed is a teacher or group of teachers

with a well rounded and macroscopic view of the discipline and a high degree of interest. For administrators it is a dream come true to find one teacher who is capable of teaching the program, thereby highly diminishing the problem of scheduling. However, there are certain disadvantages to having a one-teacher program. The most apparent disadvantage is that the students get only one point of view and one bias on the material taught where many points of view should be given. The material selected for the one-teacher program tends to be what that teacher thinks is best, omitting other valuable areas of instruction. Another disadvantage (and this is not only true of the one-teacher humanities program) is the falling off of motivation for the students by having one teacher teach the program; what is needed are many or several different "faces" in order to keep the fire going.

In reality it is a herculean task to expect one teacher to be learned enough in all the diverse areas of the humanities. This is especially true today where there are very few teachers who are graduated with a major or minor in the humanities, and if they hold such a degree it is most generally a degree in the classics.

The most lively and interesting humanities programs are those taught by the team teaching method. The team has the distinct advantage of pooling together several valuable sources of talent. What is of absolute necessity for the team approach is its agreement as to what the discipline of the humanities is. One of the greatest setbacks in instituting the team teaching approach to the humanities is the Carnegie system-- six or seven hours of instruction for each day of school. Schools with modular scheduling have circumvented the difficulty of team teaching.

Of the three types of programs in the humanities-- the historical, philosophical, or aesthetical approach-- two can be taught without too much difficulty by one teacher: the historical and philosophical programs. How well they can be taught by one teacher depends on that teacher's preparation in the discipline. The aesthetical program in the humanities is best taught by the team where each member of the team teaches his area of art, literature, music, or philosophy.

The costs of the various types of humanities programs vary greatly depending on just how many materials and teachers are used. Generally, since textbooks are the main sources used by students, the historically and philosophically structured programs are less

expensive in setting up than the aesthetically structured programs. It should be kept in mind that good single texts are difficult to find and for that reason paperbacks are most frequently used in humanities classes. The aesthetically structured programs are more expensive since they use many sources: tapes, records, slides, books, films, transparencies, and the equipment needed for them.

Cost should not be a factor in education, but since it is, the costs can be spared by the teacher or team if they would make their own materials with the cooperation of the audio-visual department. Often, in fact, a purchased set of materials doesn't meet the specific needs for a particular school's program in the humanities. Schools can make their own colored slides by taking pictures from art books with a 35mm camera, making tapes of recordings that the public and/or school library and other teachers may have, making full use of the bulletin board, and the overhead projector. One of the best sources for materials to be photographed for slides, tapes made from records, and published materials for transparencies is from the class itself.

Recommended for further reading on the humanities are the following articles:

J.C. Baxley, "Humanities for the Less Able Student," E J, 51:485-87, October, 1962.

W.A. Clark, "Humanities Program in the High School" E J, 51:474-76+, October, 1962.

E.M. Copeland, "There Was a Child Went Forth," E J, 54:182-84, March, 1965.

L.K. Frank, "Why Modernize the Humanities?" Educational Leadership, 20(4):220-24, January, 1963.

C.R. Keller, "Humanities in an Educational Revolution," National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 44:166-73; October, 1960.

C.R. Keller, "The Wave of the Present," E J, 54:171-74, March, 1964.

Martin C. Wiltgen, Humanities teacher at Mankato High School, studied at the University of Chicago as a John Hay Fellow in 1965-66.