TEACHING ENGLISH TO DISADVANTAGED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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There are a number of terms used to describe the type of student I refer to in my title, and all of them seem misleading. "Underprivileged," "Disadvantaged," "Culturally Deprived," everything implies that these students have missed something that the person assigning the term has not. What he hasn't missed is the advantage and privilege of a white middle class culture. What the terms imply, therefore, is that people who don't have the advantages of a white middle class culture are accordingly deprived.

Of course there is much truth in this. There is no need to itemize the social, political, and economic advantages of belonging to the white middle class. Educationally, however, the assumption is dangerous. It leads one to suppose that if he takes a disadvantaged child out of his subcultural environment and gives him the full benefit of a middle class education, then everything will be better for the child.

This positive supposition underlies most of the summer programs for the disadvantaged that I know about, and it was the original cornerstone of the program in which I served as English Chairman at Carleton College last summer. This program is called Project ABC (A Better Chance). The same supposition was the genesis of a program that I shall be serving as Director at Milton Academy this coming summer. This is called the Educational Enrichment Program, and I shall discuss it later. I shall start with the ABC program because in it the change of environment is dramatically clear, and because it was here that I became aware of problems facing programs like this.

Project ABC is a near-perfect expression of the American Dream. Backed by private funds and supported by the best private boarding schools in the country, it is the aim of the project to discover talented disadvantaged children (ISTSP: Independent Schools Talent Search Program) and to place them in member private schools for a two to four year stay until graduation. The ABC summer programs (Carleton, Dartmouth, and Williams last year) are designed as a bridge between

the world of the student's home and the boarding school. Thus a lucky ghetto child is literally flown from Harlem or Bogalusa or Watts to Carleton and thence after seven weeks to one of the most privileged schools in America, Milton, or Mount Hermon or Concord Academy.

Such an Algeresque leap is made by a select few. To qualify, a student had to come from a poor family (generally $4000 annual family income or less) and a substandard educational environment, and he had to be of unusual academic and personal promise, as indicated by tests and recommendations. Last year, of every eighteen completed applications for admission there was only room enough for one student. The 13-17 year old boys and girls who came to Carleton were mostly Negroes, the rest being American Indian except for three whites and a Chinese boy. Since most of the students came from segregated ghettos and reservations, their jump to the white upper middle class private schools would be that much greater because of the other sort of segregation awaiting them.

It is so great in fact that many an ABC student's most immediate need on arriving at a boarding school is to seek security by conforming in every possible way. Professor Arthur Gropen, the ABC Director at Carleton last summer, referred to this as the student's urge to become a "white middle class Negro." On the surface, this is what the program is geared to produce, and paradoxical as it may be, it offers a lot of hope to Negro children and their parents who often urge them to enroll so that they can "get out" of their present trap.

Educationally, too, it offers a lot of hope. The boarding schools offering scholarships to ABC students adhere to the highest standards with student-teacher ratios that no public school can at present match. This allows ABC students to stretch themselves to the limit of their abilities, perhaps for the first time, and also to do it in surroundings where such behavior is normal. Finally, a successful boarding school career all but guarantees admission to a satisfactory college. All this is a gain.

Where the educational danger lies is in the potential loss. In a boarding school the educational standards are emphatically white upper middle class. In forcing himself to meet these new requirements, a Negro or an Indian can quickly lose his own values, his own identity, his own sense of understanding. In

place of this may come the worship of success, the mask that he doesn't even know is a mask, the canned knowledge.

It is easy enough to see how this might happen in English. A student is thrown into a survey of English Literature in which he learns that the way to get by is to learn what the footnotes say and to pay attention to the teacher. Since his writing is not grammatical, the student is drilled on correctness, which he learns at the expense of any feeling whatever. At the same time, the student's speech is altered, since the teacher has discovered that a persistent Southern Negro dialect leads the student to misspell many of the word endings that he slurs. In vocabulary drill, the student memorizes a number of words to beef up his unsophisticated language and to pad his college board score. I doubt if I have to go on with what is not an exaggerated analogy to demonstrate the potential destruction of what the "disadvantaged" student already has in favor of the polished mask of the successful scholar.

What this "disadvantaged" person has as an English student is very closely related to what he has as a person: candor, spontaneity, and a wealth of experience. In my classes last summer I found ABC students to be generally less defensive than other students I have taught in public and private schools. They were more inclined to say what they felt than what they thought I wanted to hear (although there was still a lot of the latter). They were more easily excited and yet more mature socially, perhaps because they had less that they felt it necessary to hide (they had all come from the same kind of background and they were all "new" at the same time). Their maturity gave them a great deal of personal honesty. Their cultural background (mainly Negro and Indian) gave them a marked dignity. These many qualities gave their writing character. What their words lacked in finesse, they gained in vitality.

It was our great concern to hold onto the vitality while recognizing the fact that there was a need for polish if these boys and girls were to have a worthwhile experience in boarding school. The balance is urgent, for not only do these students have a lot to gain from boarding school life if they don't lose their own lives in the bargain, but also if they keep alive as they were they will contribute immeasurably to the rather ingrown middle class oriented community that they enter. Most students in these communities have been saturated by values that they may never have had an opportunity to question any more than most people

question what they mean when they say "culturally deprived." In fact, there is a deprivation from being enveloped in one's own culture without getting any perspective on it. Boys and girls from programs like Carleton's ABC offer this kind of opportunity to schools.

Fortunately we had a chance to plan an English program that might begin to deal with the conflict I have described. Thanks to Professor Gropen and many past ABC programs, we had a base of understanding when I met with the English teachers to discuss the summer program. What we came up with seemed a step toward meeting the particular problems of Project ABC.

II

It semmed appropriate to focus our English program on writing for two reasons: first, it would enable these students to express themselves in their own way; second, it would prepare them for the frequent writing that they would have to do in boarding school and that most of them had not done in their previous schools. The writing program that best seemed to fill our needs was our own modification of a much longer sequence designed by James Moffett of Harvard. I shall describe this in detail below. Given this emphasis on writing, we develped a reading program that would complement the writing both technically and thematically. For example, when writing about a personal memory, a student might read "Molly Morgan" by John Steinbeck, a story about a girl haunted by her memory of her father; the student might also be reminded of the fisherman's memories in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. The readings also complemented the students' thoughts about themselves, and this helped their writing, too. Certainly we aimed to develop the students' reading ability as such, but our first concern was to support writing.

The Writing Program

We founded our writing program on several principles:

1. The program should be inductive, beginning with students' inner experience and working outward relating experience to literature.

2. Structure should be increasingly emphasized.

3. Student errors will be marked selectively (we avoided the overuse of red ink) and corrected individually (no grammar or composition books were used). We always said something good about every composition.

4. Students will write every day, and all writing will be returned in one day. Frequent conferences will be held. No grades will be given.

5. All students will be sectioned together regardless of their grade in school or their estimated ability (We broke this rule by putting the very oldest sudents together, and by putting five students with severe mechanical difficulties into special section.)

With these principles in mind, we centered the progression of our program on a sequence of twelve assignments covering a seven week period. Each assignment was taken in several steps which included rough drafts and outlines on the later assignments. The sequence begins with completely unstructured inner-directed observations written in whatever order occurs to the student. Gradually, we worked on developing a sense of the need for structure by encouraging the writers to control the reactions of other students to their work. To do this, we spent more time on the earlier, unstructured assignments than we did on the later ones in which we finally gave the students an organizational pattern to follow. We gave them a pattern because we thought that they ought to be sure of themselves to the extent of being able to see what we gave them as a tool, not as an answer to all their writing problems. As we emphasized structure more and more, we also emphasized writing about literature. Then the last two assignments returned them to what they were doing much earlier, ending with an autobiography. Thus, in theory at least, we made their ability to write about themselves the culmination of the summer. The teachers agreed that this often turned out to be the case.

Our sequence follows. (The titles of the assignments are in most cases the names James Moffett used. Our major variation from his program was to change his original sequence while skipping a number of his assignments.)

1. Sensory Monologue: Three or four assignments. Students were told to go somewhere and write down anything that came into their heads for fifteen minutes. We didn't care if they wrote in sentences or in any recognizable form. By discussing the results inductively, we tried to encourage the students to see the value of sensory language which seemed to find its way into the observations they liked best. Finally they rewrote one of several observations to hand in, touching up details

whenever they felt like it.

2. Memory Monologue: Three or four assignments. Again the student is set free to write down all the memories that come into his head. In class he is encouraged to select several memories to expand into detailed accounts. The best expansion is again rewritten. We tried to point out the relationship between sensual experience and what they remembered best.

3. Dramatic Monologue: Two or three assignments. Here the student is asked to imagine that he is someone else talking to himself or to a silent listener. This takes the student outside of his own experience. The rewrite of this assignment stressed the circumstances under which the monologue is spoken. This is a step toward structure. These papers were read in class.

4. Dialogue: Two assignments. This developed from number three. Students could continue with their monologue speaker, adding another. There was added stress on order, since students now wanted to control the response of the class.

5. Short Play or Dramatic Scene: Two assignments. I first asked my students to describe in writing the scene that was going to occur. In this way they had to work out their structure ahead of time, as in an outline.

6. Interview or On-the-spot Observation: Two assignments. We used the real thing as a logical follow-up to imagined conversation. The students all went out and gathered fresh experiences, with people whenever possible. After taking notes on the spot, students recreated their impressions in the form they thought best. (This assignment was most successful.)

7. Narrative Illustrating a Generality: Two assignments. In many cases, students saw that good interviews were tied together by a single attitude on the part of the writer or by a point that the writer was trying to make. We encouraged them to do this intentionally. They were to control their story or report in such a way as to get across an attitude by example not by direct statement. (This assignment failed, largely because we didn't give it enough background.)

8. Several Incidents United by a Theme: Two assignments; five paragraph pattern. Here we began to mix reading and writing directly. I urged my students to select a theme from Lord of the Flies, showing how three incidents from the book related to the theme.

These incidents would be like the examples used in assignment number seven. The five paragraph theme model required the students to have an introduction, three paragraphs of one incident each, and a conclusion. The introduction and conclusion had to refer to all three incidents. After the students made outlines, we discussed the problem of a logical order for the incidents.

9. Generalization Supported by Illustrations: Two assignments; five paragraph pattern. Again students wrote about literature. They were encouraged to take three themes such as they wrote about in number eight and to form them into a generalization about Lord of the Flies.

10. Generalizations United into a Theory: Two assignments; five paragraph theme. This expanded number nine. I encouraged students to write about three separate readings, taking a generalization from each. Here we emphasized logical order and clear transitions.

11. Socratic Dialogue: Two assignments. Students were to write a dialogue that made a point and followed a logical direction. In this way we hoped to review while keeping our focus on order. (Unfortunately, time limitations forced most teachers to skip this assignment.)

12. Autobiography: Two assignments. Here the students were set free to follow their own order and subject choice. We encouraged them to look at their early writings about themselves for material. We wanted them to regain some of their early spontaneity in this.

Except for the section of five special students who spent the whole seven weeks writing descriptive paragraphs in standard patterns and working on basic mechanical problems, everyone followed the sequence of assignments as I have outlined it. There were other writing exercises describing pictures from the collection of photographs, The Family of Man, and all students wrote two writing sample type exercises which were group corrected for the benefit of the teachers. Finally, a number of the students wrote short poems in and out of class.

The Reading Program

The reading program was built around a core of short novels. We chose novels with which the students could identify; this helped their self undersatnding and helped their writing as a result. We also chose novels that would force the student to confront more than the story. We wanted them to become more aware of the allegorical areas in literature just as we wanted them to become

more conscious of structure in writing. All of the readings dealt with individuals who were set off from the society in which they lived, and we felt that this was an appropriate theme for students who were about t find themselves in the same situation. The core readings were:

1. The Light in the Forest, Conrad Richter. We chose this because it might absorb Indian students in particular, and also because the basic question "Who a I, an Indian or a white man?" seemed appropriate to everyone.

2. The Pearl, John Steinbeck. Students identified with this too, but we particularly liked it because of the allegorical level and stylistic sophistication.

3. The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway. This novel has the same qualities as The Pearl. By now students began to recognize the theme of an isolated individual and his values.

4. Lord of the Flies, William Golding. Although this is a much more "arty" book, students easily handled the many allegorical levels, and they also recognized the almost computer perfect structure of the nov

5. The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner, Ala Sillitoe. This novella brought the students back to a more literal level, one which might rather closely parallel their own situation in a boarding school. This reading summed up the "individual" theme.

Around this core were numerous readings chosen by the individual teachers: short stories were used to parallel writing assignments; poems helped to bring ou the essence of a reading or writing as well as to deve op a feeling for the richness of language; finally, mos of us read a Shakespearean play, either Othello or Romeo and Juliet, in order to make the most of the lan guage while trying to get the students really excited about the kind of work they would certainly encounter in private schools.

The Study Skills Program

We decided to set the area of study skills off fro the writing program because we felt that to include ba ic skills in a writing course would dampen the freshne and enthusiasm of what the students were doing. There- fore we held study skills sessions at a different time and place, and we arranged to have Carleton students supervise the work. Thanks to their help, the program

was far more exciting than it could have been otherwise.

Each ABC student was required to keep a notebook for vocabulary and spelling. In it he kept a record of all words he misspelled. His Carleton supervisor did the follow-up on only these words. Each student was also responsible for finding one new vocabulary word each day. The word could be slang or technical, anything they could demonstrate they had a use for. The Carleton supervisor worked with the student in getting him interested in a personal vocabulary.

In additon to the notebooks, we set up weekly exercises, each one aiming at a specific skill. Our major concern was relevance. Hence we had them do a library worksheet on John Brown because we could find enough that would relate to a play they were about to see, Harper's Ferry, as well as to the Negro past. In dictionary work we were less successful. We had the students write precis exercises using articles about the Newark riots. We also did work on note-taking.

Thus the study skills program avoided the standard textbook approach as well as the classroom. It seems clear that the more a program like this appeals to the students' own interests, the more successful it will be.

III

Clearly, the whole English program as I have described it suffers from being a compromise between a free, purely inductive approach that takes the students entirely on their own terms, and a controlled, deductive infusion of learning. Given the ABC function as a bridge between the worlds of the ghetto and the private boarding school, I still think that our approach was sound. We ran the risk, however, of covering too much too lightly. Perhaps this is the hazard of any whirlwind summer program; surely the transfer from formless personal feelings to structured objective critiques in writing could be better handled over a whole year, or two years. The readings were better paced, but they also formed a compromise curriculum. The Indian world of the eighteenth century in The Light in the Forest, the Mexican world of The Pearl, the English reformatory of The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner, all of these are once removed from the exact experience of the ghetto, the world of Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land. At times in Study Skills we met this world directly, but we still found ourselves trapped when we did a project on the dictionary. And why did we do anything with the dictionary at all? Because it is part of our accepted middle class educational structure which is the core of the participating schools.

Of course it is also relevant that most of these students have been part of that structure all along in their public schools which follow most of the same practices and accept the same success oriented goals. In fact, most of the ABC students have been "winners" in their local junior high schools. In a sense, therefore, our program was designed to encourage them to reconsider themselves from the vantage point of a fresh start. This is perhaps the greatest opportunity of all for an ABC student: he gets a chance to see himself apart from the world for a moment, and it is up to ABC and other educational institutions not to pressure him into hiding again behind another set of superimposed values.

IV

What would happen if the program teaching disadvantaged students were not in the very special situation of a Project ABC? An example of this is the Educational Enrichment Program at Milton Academy. Here, junior high school boys and girls a year or two younger than the average ABC student are bussed out from Boston every weekday for a six week summer session. The students are selected because they are under-achievers. It is the chief purpose of the program to help the student change his attitude toward himself and toward his education.

To do this, the English curriculum, like ABC's, centers on writing. The writing program is more purely inductive, however. There is no imposed structure whatever. All of the writing projects are descriptive in nature, and the approach to the description is left up to the student. In order to create the desire to write, students are taken on many trips to places of intense activity or emotional impact: the Boston markets, criminal court, a ruined fort far out in Boston harbor. The result is writing that brings out the students' feelings in a very sincere way. The papers are not marked in any way; students are helped to improve on their own terms rather than on the teacher's. Devices other than the written word are also used by students: polaroid photographs picture emotions; movies made by students expand this in a more complex way; music expresses an understanding beyond vocabulary.

With this kind of freedom for self expression, the students do gain a much greater sense of who they are. Back in their public schools the following winter, their grades don't shoot up, but their attitude often does. To keep this going, Milton

runs a Saturday morning program throughout the winter, and students are invited back for a second summer. Thus Milton's EEP is a continuing influence rather than a lightning encounter like Project ABC.

In each case, though, the problem of a bridge between two worlds is the same, for the Boston Public Schools are just as far from the heart of the so-called disadvantaged students as are the boarding schools with whom ABC works as are, perhaps, the students themselves who are finally at the mercy of these schools.

So it is the chief concern of programs for the disadvantaged to try to help these boys and girls out of their dilemma. This can be done in English by encouraging the student to express what is true within himself without assuming that what is true for the advantaged student ought to be true for the disadvantaged student. Along with this major concern, it is necessary for these programs to help schools to understand what these students have to offer. It does not seem to be an overstatement to suggest that an ABC student helps a private school that he enters a lot more than it helps him--that is, if the student is not submerged. If he isn't, there is a good chance that he will help other "advantaged" students, and some of their English teachers, to emerge.

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