

A Report on the Conference on Cooperation Between Secondary and College Teachers at the University of Minnesota

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At present . . . college English departments as they are, and high school English departments as they are becoming, appear headed in opposite directions.

— Anna Lee Stensland, MEJ, winter 1970

The chief fault with this prediction is the assumption that college English departments immutably are, that they do not also become something better, worse, or at any rate different. Keenly aware that our department is changing (hopefully for the better), and more vaguely but still deeply aware that high-school departments are changing in ways unforeseen by us (again, hopefully for the better), the University of Minnesota's Freshman English Advisory Committee has for two years talked of holding a conference aimed at improving cooperation between secondary and college-level teachers of English. To keep matters as simple as possible, we originally planned to concentrate attention on the real and ideal roles of Freshman English. However, when the first planning meeting was held with a few Twin Cities teachers, it became obvious that the focus could not be so restricted but had instead to cover the basic problems of curricula and teaching methods, had indeed to include the too-often skirted question of how to train and who is to train the future teachers of English. While we thought our aims doubtless too ambitious for a single conference, we hoped to make a beginning towards all of them, in the process identifying the most vital concerns and breaking the most dangerous stereotypes. With these qualified hopes we called a conference for May 16, 1970, asking teachers only from the immediate area.

The planning committee's misgivings were in part borne out. Since attendance was much lower than hoped for (sixty-two in all), the elaborate range of workshops scheduled for the afternoon reduced itself, by its own dark laws of dynamics, to only two, neither concerned directly with improving cooperation and consultation. Thus the central issue did not get addressed, although the very act of discussing other issues near the center made most conferees recommend that another such conference be held in the fall of 1970.

In larger part, perhaps, this urging came as a result of the morning session, during which representatives of the university, junior colleges, and Twin Cities high schools exchanged information about present curricula, methods, and plans. Ted Wright, Toni McNaron, and Ray McClure spoke for the English Department; Gerald Brunetti described projected changes in English Education; and Philip Bly of Normandale State Junior College and Sy Yesner of the Minneapolis schools spoke for the junior-college and secondary teachers. Two university students joined with the speakers in answering questions from the audience, and questions, answers, and discussion were lively. By the end several stereotypes had been cracked if not broken.

Hopefully, one crack occurred when Professor Wright described the revised curriculum of the English Department. Under this recently approved plan courses in writing - especially of fiction and poetry - will be more numerous and easily available, while course offerings in literature will be more varied in subject and kind. Analysis had shown that our courses in literature fall into four kinds: 1. historical courses (period courses; period-bound courses in a single genre, such as *The Victorian Novel*; history of criticism); 2. courses in major authors; 3. courses in literary kinds and techniques; and 4. thematic and interdisciplinary courses. In the past we have offered few courses of type three and nearly none of type four. In 1970-71, as one of the first consequences of our curriculum reform, several courses of these latter types will be offered: *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, *Allegory*, *Black Autobiography*, *Techniques of Poetry*, to name fewer than half. In the following year the historical offerings will be radically changed. Instead of surveying a period (*The Eighteenth Century*, say, or *The Victorian Age*) for a full three quarters, students will take a single-quarter survey of the period and then, if interested, move out into courses in authors, genres, or themes more or less relevant to that period (*The Poem as Painting*, *The Literature of Industrialization*), or into a specialized historical course (*The Johnson Circle*, *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*). Students electing to ignore the historical approach will largely be able to do so; students electing to concentrate on literary history will likewise be able to do so, although in each case students will be counselled and perhaps required to take a few courses of the other types. A much greater variety of sophomore courses is being devised and will be taught in 1971-72. Finally, while Freshman English was not reformed by the Curriculum Committee, that is in part because it was widely reformed three years ago and has several experimental sections scheduled for 1970-71.

These reforms may appear timid, half-hearted, or even misguided to readers hoping for a radically new training of teachers for "student centered" English programs. It is an old complaint that neither the curriculum nor the teaching methods of university English departments is of much aid to future teachers of English

in the schools - a charge often levelled at colleges of Education as well. It was renewed eloquently and at length by Hubert Anderson, a teacher from Hopkins Senior High School, who remained skeptical even after hearing the new curriculum described. Apparently this lack of confidence grows not only from a long history of neglect and mutual suspicion, but also from a real difference of opinion - based on real differences in values - as to what a university English department should do. The article from which I took my epigraph describes this difference, and Anderson and a few others gave voice to it at the conference.

This question of what the role of Minnesota's largest English department should be in the training and education of future teachers seems the natural topic for other conferences. It is impossible to tell why this one was so poorly attended - a too diffuse subject, the competition of a lovely spring day and a poetry conference, distress over the invasion of Cambodia and its domestic repercussions, or resentment of an imputed bossism in our calling the conference rather than working through the MCTE. This last objection points up the real differences among us, for few of the English faculty at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis are MCTE members - indeed I am not. These differences need to be explored and settled as much and as soon as possible. When the next conference is held, I hope all my readers will attend to help accomplish this end.

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