forum

The English Teacher's Future Shock

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS IN SENIOR HIGH ENGLISH

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Prophecies, in retrospect, are sometimes remembered when accurate, but usually forgotten when off-base. None of us today claims the power of Nostradamus -- or even of Jean Dixon; the signs we read are not in the stars but in events around us, and the events, like the stars, can be misread. I offer a pact: If, over the next few years, you refrain from reminding us of our misses, we, in turn, will spare you the "I-told-you-so's."

The planners of this year's MCTE Annual Conference were wise, I've decided, in limiting our prognostications to the next five years. At the present rate of accelerating change, that may be all the farther any of us care to see, or as much change as any of us are capable of grasping. My design today is primarily deductive. I'll begin by wielding a broad brush, examining observed individual and cultural changes and their implications for senior high English.

Though many forces are at work to produce change, and though the next five years will produce both new and increased pressures, my primary concern is whether we will develop sufficient vision in the next five years to begin preparing for the even greater changes that are to come. Public education has too often been "after the fact," remediating rather than anticipating and preparing. In my manic stages, I have high hopes that we are beginning to gear education to the future ... or at least to the present. In my more frequent depressive stages, I despair that we are continuing to prepare students for a glorious past. Our lack of response -- or negative responses -- to change have perhaps rightly brought the charge of "mindlessness" from critics of education during the

past five years. Since MCTE conventions tend to trigger my manic state, I'll try to identify the positive responses to change we'll be making over the next five years.

Career education -- learning specific skills for specific occupational pursuits -- appears to be in a period of ascendancy. Though we continue to give lip service to the ideal of a liberal, humanizing education, the present establishment of priorities and allocation of funds point definitely to a continuation of the trend. Most of us in English are alarmed -- sometimes to the point of becoming paranoid about our goals; everyone else is out of step; we're the last hope for keeping men from becoming total automatons. The next five years may see us frantically maneuvering to keep our subject alive as something in addition to a skills course. Five years may not show much progress, but I predict we'll keep the humanizing goal of education alive, even if we have trouble reducing it to behavioral terms.

Changing student attitudes and expectations will also affect the teaching of English during the next five years. Costs of college and doubts about immediate and measurable benefits of a college education will remove preparation for college as a goal for many students. Disenchantment with the intellectual and the rational, coupled with a growing interest in the mystic and the irrational, will have their effect on our classes. Secondary English teachers will face the task of helping students develop balanced skills in both affective and cognitive domains. In many areas we'll face the additional task of convincing students that the means of consciousness-expansion we are promoting are preferable to the "easy" routes of cheap turn-ons -- chemical or otherwise.

Patterns of institutional change will continue to affect our role. The family, the church, and the school all seem to have declining influence, but schools are being asked to take over functions once considered the province of church and family. We may find ourselves tragically choosing between imposing values (indoctrination) or avoiding all mention of them, leaving a moral void. I see the profession -- and the English language arts in particular -- becoming more active in making students consciously aware of their choices, and of the various ethical and moral systems that influence them.

Society itself is changing -- its makeup, its values, where people live, how they live. Our students are creatures of the moment who see little connection with or relevance in the literature, the values, and the experiences of the past. We face the dual task of helping them discover and define their humanity, by making the literature of the past come alive, and by providing literature and learning experiences that reflect the present and anticipate the future. We would like our stu-

dents to be ready for change and comfortable with it. And we'd like them to accept and appreciate the rich diversity of people and ideas rather than feel threatened by them. Reversing attitudes about diversity and change is not easy, and we'll continue to face special problems doing so in areas of rapid transition or extreme isolation.

Another factor that will frustrate our attempts is an apparent decline in functional literacy. There are still students who don't learn the skills of reading; the Right-to-Read program is yet another attack on this problem. But there are many who, having learned basic skills, choose not to use them -- perhaps because, in spite of our proscriptions to the contrary, they have discovered that they don't have to! Their narrowly defined jobs don't require reading, they take no pleasure in it, and the electronic media provide pre-digested information, opinion, and entertainment. Damning McLuhan is not the answer, even though the tradition of slaying the bearer of bad tidings (or uncomfortable prophecies) is still with us. Teachers of senior high English must continue to plug for development of basic reading skills, and we must help students find personal satisfaction in their reading. But we cannot ignore the electronic media; they are here to stay, and students need help in developing skills in seeing and hearing, and criteria for selection and evaluation, just as they need direction in expanding critical reading skills.

The National Council has urged, and events of the last weeks have emphasized, that we must take responsibility for combatting both public and private doublespeak. The development of critical listening and thinking skills -- the "built-in, shock-proof crap detectors" Hemingway refers to, should be high on our priority list during the next five years. Gullibility once it realizes it has been seduced breeds cynicism, rejection of all authority, all ideas, all utterances. Our job must be that of making students critical, rather than unconscious, consumers of language.

We tend also to become easily upset at our students' uncritical production of language. The youth culture is its own speech community, and the "anything goes" attitude and halting, not-even-word-searching ("Uh...like...you know what I mean") patterns still clash with the expectations of colleges, businesses, and secretarial schools. The battle lines between the prescriptivists and the descriptivists may again be drawn. I'm a bit worried that the either-or dichotomy will become greater with the accountability syndrome. I would hope that most secondary English teachers, rather than taking sides, would stress bi- (poly-) dialectism, stressing appropriateness to communication situation rather than universal correctness, helping students to assess their language needs realistically and to learn to shift dialect gears smoothly.

The next five years should also see us giving greater attention to non-verbal communication, helping students realize that there's much more to communication than the well-turned phrase.

The next five years will convince far more people that the ecological crisis is real, that unlimited resources can no longer be taken for granted, and that unlimited abuse of the environment cannot be tolerated if man is to survive. Paralleling the ecological crisis are deepening social crises: confrontation and polarization of individuals, groups, and ideologies. As teachers of language and literature we will play a vital role in the development of awarenesses and attitudes conducive to human survival. The replacement of competitive mind sets with group process, problem-solving, cooperative models of human interaction may ultimately be the most important function schools can perform.

I see the next five years, in summary, as a kind of identity crisis for the schools, and for senior high English. The current trend is to see school as a trainer of docile citizens, pliable consumers of ideas and products, and as a producer of a work force tuned to the needs of an over-consuming society. Teachers of English will probably be more inclined to view the school's role as one of preparing thinking, questing, creative, sharing, problem-solving individuals for an ever-changing world. Ours is the broader vision. It may be eclipsed for a few years, but I predict it will prevail.

Myron Bietz is president of the MCEE. His article was first delivered as a talk at the MCTE Annual Conference at Mankato this spring.