

Towards the Improvement of English Teacher Education in Minnesota: Chapters in a Continuing History

CHAPTER III: The Founding of the Minnesota Conference of English Education

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Somewhere between Britain's Summerhill School directed by A.S. Neil's credo of love, and the arbitrary, tightly clocked, compartmentalized and still too typical American and British schools is an on-going educational venture supported by the accrued wisdom and experience of numerous concerned professionals who draw educational content and processes from a variety of pertinent sources. English educators can draw support from a wide range of talent from Frye to Bruner, Richards to Burke, Roberts to Fader, Conant to Cole, Socrates to Chomsky, if you will. Being applied to that continuum from childhood to adulthood is the consummate knowledge of almost countless researchers, innovators, theorists, seers, saints, and even a few salutary sinners. Direction in English education is being drawn from such diverse sources as ethno-linguistics, game theory, group dynamics, psychotherapy, literary criticism, cultural anthropology, comparative philology, mixed media studies, creativity studies, psycholinguistics, and rhetorical theory.

The ever greater need for an articulate and aware people can no longer be denigrated by inept educational processes, archaic assumptions, or hazy objectives. Man's need for sensitive response to his environment and to other men can no longer be forfeited by materialistic ends achieved by mundane means. English education with its essence drawn from that most essential of all human phenomena--language--is in a unique position to accomodate man's needs at a most critical time in history.

Seven years ago, after a hectic six-hundred mile drive in shifts, several Minnesota colleagues and I joined numerous other concerned professionals at the charter Conference on English Education at Indiana University. April, 1970, will mark the eighth national conference on English Education with its greatly increased membership and proliferation of topics and concerns that indicate not only the validity of previous conferences but an increasing impact on the profession.

In 1961, the widely publicized report The National Interest and the Teaching of English clearly indicated that all was not well with English teaching despite continuing impact of the NCTE and its many affiliates. Certainly all was not well in

English education despite enormous consequent investments of time, energy, and money. It is significant that now we mark the beginning of another concerted effort in English education with the founding of the Minnesota affiliate of the Conference on English Education. Membership shares a common interest in a difficult to define discipline and a common concern with the training and continuing development of young professionals who will follow us into classrooms, graduate seminars, and research projects in years to come.

Time has come to pool our talents, concerns, and aspirations to refute past failures, refine present successes in processes and materials, and help develop new, more viable procedures for the most basic of all disciplines--English teaching. Our charge is greater today because it is addressed to a far greater urgency in the affairs of men.

David Russell, in the preface to the first reports of the Conference on English Education said,

In one sense English education ranges from the kindergartener learning a nursery rhyme to the doctoral candidate studying variant spellings in Elizabethan folios. In a much narrower meaning it refers to courses and activities which help to prepare the prospective teacher of English for his work in schools and colleges. It is with the more limited conception that the conference herein reported deals. A preliminary inquiry by the National Council of Teachers of English revealed that some 1,150 persons throughout the United States have a part of their academic assignment responsibility for students in "methods" courses in the teaching of English...Although the Council has always been concerned with English education in the broad sense, the Executive Committee felt that the time had come for a study of problems specifically focused on the preparation of teachers of English.

Such is our position today where along with Wisconsin, New York, and Illinois, Minnesota founds the fourth state affiliate of the Conference of English Education. Its concerns will range from the single methods course to the entire underlying program that leads to competent undergraduate training programs and beyond. It will be responsible for breaking existing barriers too frequently imposed between so-called academic and professional courses and providing in a variety of schema the most viable training programs possible. It will be responsible for helping turn what President Rand of St. Olaf College recently called "talented amateurs" into responsive and responsible professionals. The Minnesota conference must enable the coordination of

our various talents and material resources in light of the nature of our discipline and our responsibility to its future practitioners.

A wise educator-scholar with whom I have been privileged to talk at length at several national CEE meetings, George Henry of the University of Delaware, said of method that it was "... a liberating intellectual experience. Method is here conceived as the form of the art of teaching." We must within a liberal tradition, as best as it can be preserved and strengthened, assist the training of teachers of English in that art.

We must examine the probable consequences of continuing to help produce adequate teachers under existing conditions and pursue the possibility of producing excellent teachers under better conditions. As we fail or succeed the profession falters or advances. Good teachers, perhaps, are born, but excellent teachers derive from inherent capabilities, training, and meaningful experience. The former we can capitalize upon only by strengthening the latter.

In an era of man on the moon, ICBM, acid rock, alienated youth, the sit-in and the cop-out, we are hard put at best to do our best by students many of whom will teach by the precepts we provide. James Moffett in his provocative book, Teaching a Universe of Discourse, wrote,

Now it is not hard to find a structure in English, all the particles-word, sentence, paragraph, composition as a whole literary "form"-offer us structure, a regress of increasingly larger contexts. But what are they sub-structures of? For the regress is only theoretically infinite; our conception is always finite. Some ultimate context or super-structure is exactly what English as a school subject has always lacked.

Perhaps we could say the same for English education. What are its ideal sub-structures? What collateral content is most meaningful? What training sequences and experiences are most promising? What "ultimate context or super-structure" of English education should develop in our various training institutions to collectively enable us to our objective--to supply the best possible teachers of English for the classrooms of tomorrow?

James Squire said during the fourth CEE conference,

I say there is no more serious charge than that of resolving this discrepancy between what we know and what we do. If we seriously assume the responsibility of strengthening preservice programs in

English education we must discard the lesser things and see that the full force of our Dwight Burtons, Nick Hooks, Robert Pooleys, Walter Lobans and their counterparts on every campus is felt among our beginning teachers-out in the field-in the classroom; at a time when it will pay off richly in future dividends. The responsibility for looking critically at this problem is clearly one that the profession can no longer ignore.

I would remind you of resolutions passed at the 1962 Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Allerton Park Conference of College English Chairmen on the methods of teaching English and the status of those involved in English education. We have our charge and it must be met by the combined efforts of all those involved in the training of teachers--professionals in college departments of English and departments of education, cooperating teachers, supervisors, and the long line of classroom teachers from whom candidates have learned much both positive and negative about their future profession. We must as colleagues in a common venture profitably share in what Daniel Fader calls the "... freedom to experiment and freedom to criticize," that is typical of any viable discipline. Our job is essentially too important to go our separate ways. The founding of the Minnesota Conference on English Education should provide a significant power structure to improve the most important link in English education - the teacher of English.

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Graham Frear is assistant professor of English and Education at St. Olaf College, and is in charge of the English Education program. As newly elected Vice Chairman of the Minnesota Conference on English Education, he was prepared to deliver an inaugural address, but instead presents it to MCTE members in the printed form that appears above.

The other officers of the MCEE are: Chairman--Gene L. Piché, associate professor of Secondary Education, Speech, Communication and Theater Arts, University of Minnesota; Secretary-Treasurer - Leonard S. Golen, chairman of Department of English, Central High School, Duluth; and Executive Committee Members at Large - Naomi C. Chase, professor of Elementary Education, University of Minnesota; James Elsenpeter, chairman of Department of English, De La Salle High School, Minneapolis; and Ruth Lysne, chairman of Department of English, Faribault High School.