forum

Territoriality: What Shall the "English" Teacher Teach?

The Great Terminological War

by SEYMOUR YESNER
Consultant in Secondary School English, Minneapolis

As the experiential value of "English" becomes the dominating concern of the English teacher, conflict with social studies (and with other subjects) increases. The conflict is more apparent than real, perpetuated by teachers who need well delineated categories for comfort and little compartments to control. The repeated cry is "hands off"; the constant wariness is fear; the warning sign reads "trespassers beware." Eventually the cries and the fears harmonize into a kind of battle hymn that pits one teacher against the other, each struggling for a private preserve of notes, throw-away gags, assignments, tests, and bulletin board paraphernalia. In this way, issues of immediate concern to students, like civil rights, campus disturbances, student rights, the Vietnam war, are casualties of a kind of cold war that constructs its own iron curtain, well posted with "off-limits" and "no hunting" signs.

The usual image of an English teacher projects him as a person removed from reality, preoccupied with books, a habit considered worthwhile though essentially useless, and rabid about the vagaries of grammar and other language imponderables, all of which produce few tangible results other than keeping kids busy in harmless ways. This English teacher threatens no one. He is safe. Let him tread upon current "fact," and suddenly he emerges packing pistols and a submachine gun.

Should the English teacher wish to cease anaesthetizing his students by an intellectual foray into the problems that the students want to talk, write, and read about, he is often confronted by angry colleagues who accuse him of usurpation of the rights of others. Social studies teachers, probably because of interchangeable materials and unclear ideational boundaries, seem most inclined to adopt a protectionist attitude.

In this, they are often supported by principals. Typical of principal responses is this one that I overheard: "I go into an English class and there's my English teacher discussing Vietnam. Now I don't want him discussing Vietnam. What does he know about Vietnam, anyway? If anyone is going to discuss it, it's going to be my social studies teachers. They should know more about Viet-

nam than the English teacher, and I trust them more...."

Of course, what social studies teachers should know, and what they actually know are entirely different things; and the essential point is still being missed if anyone, in particular principals and social studies teachers, assumes that English teachers are any less (or more) concerned, or any less (or more) informed, than social studies teachers. They certainly, however, may be as informed. Considering that some English teachers read a lot, watch television and movies a lot, and may have strong convictions for or against the war, means they may even be better informed than some social studies teachers, in particular those who are cloistered and uncommunicative except in regard to sports, cars, and the stock market. Must English teachers, because of some ill-defined notion of the function of English on the part of teachers in other disciplines, hide their knowledge? Moreover, what if the purpose of the discussion is twofold: 1) to learn about discussion, i.e. how to discuss; 2) to learn about Vietnam utilizing the process of discussion? Clearly, to discuss, it is desirable to have something important to discuss, and of considerable interest. As a means to learn about the problems of Vietnam, discussion is appropriate. As a way to practice the use of language for the purpose of shaping and altering ideas, discussion is appropriate. From these two points of view alone, a discussion about Vietnam may make sense; reifying the idea that what is discussed may not be as important as the process of discussing. The good English teacher will accordingly line up his sights on any issue that produces the discussion, or the writing, or the reading he considers necessary for language growth.

Having revealed the paranoid side of the controversy, let me reveal a schizoid one, too, by observing that people in other disciplines have no hesitation about splitting themselves into the English teacher's "domain" when it suits their purposes. Erik Erickson and Jerome Bruner are prime examples. For instance, Bruner in his book On Knowing (pp. 43-47, Harvard University Press, 1962) devotes an entire chapter to "Identity and the Modern Novel."

Not surprisingly, thinkers like Bruner have deduced that for purposes of coping with our human curiosity about ourselves, our morality, our concepts of reality, spirituality, and all the other ramifications of being alive, demarcations into artificial subject areas are, if not ridiculous, at least ludicrous. And that literature and other arts should be tapped if they offer up useful syrup.

So, reducing the problem to the practical, what should an English teacher do when he teaches the newspaper? Should he pretend that college campuses are sedate and undisturbed by student protests? Or should he engage his students in talking, writing, and reading--i.e. thinking--about these protests, their causes and effects, and the possible solutions?

Reverse the circumstances: should a social studies teacher dealing with urban problems avoid using books like The Cool World, Manchild in the Promised Land, and Down These Mean Streets?

A significant fact for social studies teachers to consider is that the Advanced Placement Examination of May 1970 in American History contains a question like the following:

> Choose any two of the following works and explain how each illuminates the period in which it was written:
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> The Sun Also Rises
> Leaves of Grass
> Autobiography of Malcolm X
> The Grapes of Wrath
> Looking Backward
> The Confessions of Nat Turner
> Civil Disobedience
> Up From Slavery
> "Birth of a Nation"

This question relying upon literature and a film intimates that it is an exercise in stupidity to hear one side of a coin objecting to the other side's right to share the same metal.

I might add with some chagrin that, within the realm of English itself, teachers are always seeking to stake out claims. Great Expectations shouldn't be taught in the ninth grade because it kills the book for the eleventh grade; Huckleberry Finn belongs to the ninth grade; the complex sentence is reserved for tenth grade; the film "Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner" can be shown only to members of the track team.

Great Expectations should be used at any grade with any student who can read and comprehend it. First, it is not the only linear novel dealing with loss of innocence and a discovery of the need for a personal integrity. A little mining would expose much gold of the same weight and worth. For example, The Yearling. Catcher in the Rye, A Separate Peace. Second, the constant refrain of readiness--the child must be ready; the child must be sophisticated enough; the child must bring experiences to the

encounter--dupes students and teachers into believing that some ideal moment exists when child and book can be mated.

I read War and Peace for the first time when I was about twelve and found myself not ready for it; I read it again at sixteen and found myself not ready for it; I read it once again in college and found myself still not ready for it; and two years ago I read it again, and lo and behold, I was not ready for it. I expect to be always not ready for War and Peace just as each time I listen to Don Giovanni I am not ready. The experience of reading War and Peace is one of continually being readied, of discovering, of remaining always innocent and unsophisticated. And each reading experience is a part of being and of becoming, preparing and renewing me for other experiences, including the rereading of the book Each time I read, or listen, I am sure I am changed and perhaps more ready for next time, but never truly ready.... This, of course, comprises the essence of experiences that behavioral objectives can never measure.

I'm saying that neither English teachers nor social studies teachers are actullly deprived of bread nnd butter items if one book or topic is used by other teachers, no matter in which subject field. Social studies is in no way diminished in English teachers discover in their examination of literature and mass media that wars occur, divorce exists, love produces unreason, and men in general do strange things. If English teachers choose to approach these human problems in an effort to show the "truth" through literature, or through language encounters, I don't think the problems will be exhausted, stranding social studies teachers on a deserted atoll.

At least let's recognize that problems like war, racism unreason, and stupidity, plus the varieties of analytical ways of approaching these problems, are not intellectually exhausted by any teacher, or group of teachers, be they English or social studies teachers.

I am not very impressed by the argument (remember that principal!) that social problems are better left in the exclusive charge of teachers who have been trained in the social sciences. This assumes than any worldly, experienced English teacher would be less cognizant of social problems than any teacher, experienced, inexperinced, worldly, or unworldly, teaching under the classification of a "major" in social studies. There are undealing with issues of our time simply because a narrow and uninformed social studies teacher feels invaded? Intelligence, skill, talents, insights, and knowledge should be contained by no bounds other than the recognizable limits that intelligence offers to its possessor. To be honest, the trouble with most modern problems courses taught by social studies teachers is that they are neither modern, nor do they deal with problems. Ask how many consider in depth venereal disease, sex, pop art, urban decay, the host of problems the students really want to explore? In all probability, the trouble with "modern problems" emanates from the

confined vision that refuses to see relationships among subject matters and lurks in foxholes behind traditional territorial boundaries.

I recommend for both social studies and English teachers a freeing of the mind so that the mainstream of life is allowed into these subjects and a holistic conception for pedagogical purposes assimilates all subjects through a process of specialized complementation. This mental freeing produces a vision of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness, as the way to proceed. It does not divide into "realms" the cognitive and the affective. The teachers who understand specialized complementation are true beings of our time. They are specialists who can generalize, specialists who know their limitations because they communicate with, and teach with, other specialists and constantly seek to know other resources outside their specialities. They sense the connections among things even if not immediately apparent nor explainable in identical terms. This kind of specialist has an Einsteinian perception of relatedness and interaction.

Who is this specialist? He is a teacher who considers himself well qualified in some area or areas, like poetry, writing, reading, the novel, proletarian literature, vocabulary building, the great ideas of the western world, economic theory, or anything else. He is the teacher who realizes that the world and everything in it is his laboratory to explore, rearrange, think about. Because of this, his job impinges upon, and enriches, all other aspects of his life and vice versa. The complementation emerges from what the teacher sees as the cross-currents that need to flow over, through, and under his own specialized emphasis. Thus, in teaching poetry, he may bring in poets; or he may seek through a social studies teacher to find readings collateral to a poet's work, like historical and social documents that might elucidate, for example, Blake's view of the England of his time; or he may collaborate with a music teacher and music students in putting Blake's songs to music. The basic determination is to cover all generalizations, or particularizations, with permeable membranes so that ideas can flow back and forth.

To show how confined our perspectives still are, we need only consider that the history of the English language is the prerogative of English teachers (history, mind you!) but that society which gives vent to language, and in turn is influenced by language, is not. Logically, if perversely, the efforts of English teachers should be directed at excluding language from social studies, allowing these teachers the privilege of incorporating the history of language into their syllabi, if they wish, but insisting that all discourse take place in silence.

Absurdities exist in life but not as deliberate exercises. To remove aspects of culture, anthropology, history, science, art from literature or from courses relying upon an experiential base would be to court a kind of intellectual vacuity that can only end in classroom disasters and absurd situations. In spite of the fact that eminent advocates like G. Robert Carlson say our

concern in English is with what literature "does to us," we must realize that sometimes it does very little unless we know other things--like facts about the author, the cultural context in which the work was created, attitudes of other people toward it. The polemic over primacies in esteeming literature or in determining its redeeming values need not trouble us here. What needs to be clarified is the fact that anything that contributes to the rapport between a literary work and its reader does something to that reader. If to expand the reader's capacity for rapport a teacher needs to use Freud, Marx, Lorenz, or any other provocative thinker, he should use them. If this teacher knows his specialized limits, as he should, then he will provide as a complement to his course,a liaison with colleagues from other specialties (subjects).

Another case of the absurd is to reduce Hamlet to nothing but its action which would relegate the play to total fantasy without any real regard for flesh and blood concerns. Unfortunately, all too often, English literature courses become "arty," playing with nebulous behavior and affairs, designed to elicit laughter, or a few pretty tears. The sordidness and the acts of violence are never transposed onto a real world stage. This is why parents so readily accept "the classics" but repudiate, as dangerous, contemporary works.

Too willingly and too often, people are either "fooled" by romance and unreal experience, the Emma Bovaries of our world, or they are relieved of their responsibilities through the illusion of "feeling," through the temporary sense of being one with all men, of suffering with and for all creatures, of therefore being a better person, a sensitive person, who has, without the need for any further action, purged himself through an experience with the illusion of art. This is what occurs when we deify the affective realm as the primal source of all humane concerns and act as if opera singers or artists or art lovers are automatically less inclined to butchery than mathematicians and philosophers. The charitable act takes place in the theater or while reading a book; no other is necessary. If you have wept for Robert Jordan, why weep for the Vietnamese and American dead; if you sympathize and applaud Doctor Stockmann, your ecological good deed has been done, and you can smog on forever. Such illusions, John Wayne twirling a six shooter, creep out of the archetypal mists to destroy us because they ultimately become delusions similar to those that cause us to speak of "never losing a war," or "helping to save Vietnam." English teachers can contimue to compare Holden Caulfield with Pip just as social studies teachers can teach economic theory. But if neither touches on the realities of poverty, or on the conditions that alienate youth, it is a wasted exercise.

Having made my point that the process of teaching a subject demands a grounding in the solidity of pertinent matter that supersedes subject departments, that the process also demands abilities to transcend one's speciality by complementation with other

specialities, let me proceed to an operational construct that derives from the theoretical similarities and dissimilarities between English and social studies, recognizing that the most fundamental difference inheres in the original impulse that attracted one person to English and the other to something else. This impulse, in and of itself, will generally assure, even when using identical materials, substantive differences in assignments, in expectations, in techniques, and in overall objectives. No artificially constructed liaison will change the fact that by and large English teachers are not social studies teachers.

One other point should be made before going on. Teachers of any subject, as long as their primary focus in on the mere mastery of skills encompassing a delimited specialty, become little different from mechanics, production line workers, or, at best, artisans. The extension of this narrowness to something like a remedial reading course results in a mechanical stress on skills which often actually prevent kids from ever "reading" a story. To move teaching to the level of art teachers themselves must be deepened. In this respect, the teacher-artist creates his classroom ambience, as a dramatist does, from all the materials at his disposal, subordinating them to his purpose, producing a design and order that is uniquely his, non-duplicable under most circumstances by anybody whether in his subject field or out of it. Rarely is this sort of person threatened by other teachers.

So, in reality, formalistic distinctions of the type I am assying here provide nothing more than an interesting divertissment of no relevance to the teacher-artist who defines his own role, chops his own path, and knocks down arbitrary, and often foolish, barriers. The relevance of what is said here applies only to those bureaucratic minds that see order in compartments, labels, divisions, subjects, disciplines, the endless terms that stress separation and compliance rather than amalgamation and originality.

To deal with this phenomemon of petty minds, let me return to my two antagonists, the English teacher and his "foe", the social studies teacher; and let me make a rudimentary distinction between them that could make sense regardless of what materials are used: namely, that for English teachers the literary quality of a work, and the language utterances, meanings and forces, would take primacy over social-historical information.

Staying, for the purposes of this paper, with literature, I would agree with Carlsen that its importance in the classroom is "to help young people undergo the experiences considered significant by the most sensitive people that the world has produced." Carlsen says more: "What a student learns about the social period in which the work is produced is completely secondary and peripheral. What he learns about the writer and his life is secondary. Even what he may deduce about the structure that produces the sensation is of secondary importance. (I quote from a reprint of an

article entitled "Literature: Dead or Alive?" I do not know its published source.) For Carlsen, the experience is all.

One important idea has been extruded here: that literature in the high school classroom should not be treated as "art", or as "art history"; at least not as a first concern.

Immediately, the differential focus between English and social studies becomes clear, revealing the possibility for beneficial collaboration between the subjects, without loss to either.

In literature (and probably language, especially if we consider language as the whole and literature a part), the incontrovertible concerns of English teachers have as their wellspring the gush of experiences. The relation of literary beings to these experiences depands on their special symbolical qualities which, as they are expanded to the generic, levitate only then as "symbols" of human behavior. It is by extension--a conscious intellectual (and often strained) extension --that these "symbols" become societal reflections.

Let's take an example from the reality of literature and the world; let's take war. Men in wars behave in interesting and sometimes unusual ways. Thus, writers who seek to depict men's behavior must come to grips with the way men in war behave: bravely, cowardly, fearfully, antagonistically, cooperatively, gloriously, horribly.

Social studies usually does not start from this point. It is the phenomenon of war itself and the phenomena that "cause" a particular war, or wars, that engage the social scientist. One aspect of this engagement may be the psychology of men at war, or men about to go to war. It is fascinating and important to analyze mass fear, mass hysteria, mass hate, and usually this is done by isolating a case history, a specific war or a specific man.

English through literature would deal with specific men (characters) in a specific war (that often could be any war). By elevation to symbol the characters could become clusters of men, or any man. The "truth" of literature resides in this experiential power of generalization.

Social studies starts with the mass, the prevision of societal action or behavior--or the history, the past vision--and proceeds to generalize about individuals, saying that under certain conditions men behave in definable ways and it can be anticipated that under comparable conditions men will once again behave in the same way.

Social studies might consciously investigate the causes of particular wars, generalizing from these to the causes of war. Literature, if it looks at causes at all, would see the causes as part of the human condition, looking at human behavior

(through fictional beings) under duress. (At this point, Carlsen's stress on what literature does to us loses its distinctness since history or sociology may do things to us too. Oscar Lewis's Five Families and La Vida certainly did something to me.)

For ease of comparison, let's assume that a social studies class wants to investigate World War I. Coincidentally and concurrently, an English class becomes preoccupied with the theme of war. Here is a partial list of the readings in the English class:

Paths of Glory
Farewell to Arms
The Good Soldier Schweik
The Case of Sergeant Grischa
All Quiet on the Western Front
The Fable
The Guns of August

The book that might raise an eyebrow is the Guns of August which could be the starting point for a social studies course. Why is it on the English list? First, it is dubious if the English teacher would use the book as the core of the course. Instead, it would be recommended as ancillary reading to lend a kind of enlightenment to the novels. The book woulc supplement conclusions about World War I and war in general that arise from reading the novels: that men, especially leaders, are often callous and stupid; that our fictional heroes are justified in abandoning their commitment to the folly of war, that war is brutal and brutalizes; that sympathy exists for the individual who refuses to become systematized by the military, or by the bureaucracy, by those parts of society (the government, the military, the schools, the businesses) that social studies is always studying. Standing the procedure on its head (on its feet from a social studies point of view) allows the social studies teacher to use the novels as adjuncts to Tuchman's book. The novels now reinforce specific allegations about the blunders of the military bureaucracy, blunders which cause innocent men and women to participate in mutual slaughter and to lose lives, limbs, innocence and idealism. From the stand point of desirable effect, the vicarious involvement with literary beings and their experiences should produce in the reader powerful sensations which might complement the more cerebral (possibly factual) social studies

Each discipline can survive alone. By doing so, the range for imaginative probing into reality is cut down. Artificial, and arbitrary, barriers ot learning are erected by teachers, the very peo le who should be struggling to eradicate these barriers. Without any question, the lure of seeing experiences merge into a self-perpetuating, conscious holism is minimized and drudgery is maximized.

I think the confession in my presence of a well-known university history teacher that any good history teacher is a humanities teacher because he will use information from any field is a point applicable to all good teachers. He embellished this remark by revealing somewhat shame-facedly that over sixty percent of the books on his list of suggested readings were from literature.

I don't know if my point has been made: it is that terminological distinctions are basically meaningless and often confusing, if not downright defeating. To insist that the label English includes certain specifics while excluding others because those others belong under another label is to see life as piecemeal, a collection of intellectual odds and ends. The danger of this view consists in the organizational role it forces upon the teacher who ends up spending most of his time selecting and rejecting things according to unreliable definitions and labels instead of according to what is teachable and important.

Seymour Yesner has resumed his role as Consultant in English for the secondary schools of Minneapolis after a year "abroad" in New York at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.