forum

the time for change is now

At Cross-Purpose : High School and College Literature Teaching?

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A college teacher of English methods finds himself constantly caught up in certain tensions which exist between English teachers in the high school and his own academic department. The most constant of these tensions is created by the desire of the high school English departments to change as opposed to the stance of college English departments, which have traditionally been the conservators of the culture of the past. Sympathies of the methods teacher on various issues tend to vacillate along the continuum between change and tradition depending partially, perhaps, upon his age, but more probably upon his own liberal or conservative bent.

Now, however, high schools seem to be moving with breakneck speed into a new philosophy of teaching literature, and one wonders whether the college English departments can or will adjust. How tight can the tension become before high school and college English departments go their separate ways? How long will it be before the training which college English departments give in literature will no longer be pertinent to what the high school teacher needs? It is not my purpose here to condemn either the high school or the college English department. It is rather to try to define some aspects of what appears to me to be a growing tension which threatens to tear us apart.

For decades we accepted the cultural heritage approach to literature. High school and college English departments taught essentially the same materials, using essentially the same emphasis. Then came the new critics, the cry for sequence and the spiral curriculum. College English departments could and did, with some difficulty, adjust. They kept their historical surveys, but they added such courses as Interpretation of Poetry, the Nineteenth Century Novel, and the History of Dramatic Literature. They were studying "the poem" or "the play," apart from or in spite of its author and historical background.

The new philosophical approach in the high schools is represented by John Dixon's Growth Through English, James Moffett's student-centered curriculum and Louise Rosenblatt's article in the October, 1969, English Journal, "Pattern and Process -- a

Polemic," to mention only a few proponents.

One of the main tenets of this student-centered philosophy as it applies to literature says that the most important use of literature is in the sharing of experience. The student reads a novel, he compares it with his own experience, and then he discusses his reactions with his classmates. Out of the discussion the student clarifies his perception of the world. The teacher, instead of being the knower becomes the searcher. He helps the student test his reactions to the experience in the novel or poem against those of his classmates and perhaps those of the teacher. Since he cannot be an authority on the student's perception of the experience, the teacher becomes simply an older and in some ways perhaps wiser member of the class. As Dixon puts it, "The essential talk that springs from literature is talk about experience -- as we know it, as he sees it (correcting our partiality and his; exploring the fullness of his vision and ours)." (p. 60). As Louise Rosenblatt sees it, the literature teacher of 2000 A.D. will be closer to counselor than to history teacher.

The college teacher of literature has real problems with this concept. For what did he spend all of those years plumbing the depths of sixteenth century British literature? Obviously, in order that he might know, understand, interpret, and teach his knowledge to others. Perhaps the students in a student-centered approach might eventually reach a somewhat acceptable interpretation of a work of art, but who has time to wait for that? And why should he wait when he already has the information and can tell the student? The college teacher has tried inductive teaching and has been told on student evaluations that it is dishonest, it is playing games with students, searching for answers the teacher already knows. An even more bothersome question in the mind of the college teacher is by what criteria, aside from gross misreading of the text, does he dare assess what the student in his experience interprets? If we accept the student-centered approach, the author's intent and the historical-social milieu have little, if any, bearing on the study. The only significance is how the student sees the experience.

A corollary is the emphasis in the high schools on wide reading rather than in-depth reading. Perhaps the many studies indicating that literature programs of the past have not developed life-long readers of our students have finally had some effect. Many experimental programs -- modular scheduling and individualized instruction, for example -- tend to encourage this emphasis. But also, if we accept a student-centered curriculum, the student studies a work until he tires of it or until it can contribute no more to his understanding of his own life and times. In the literature-centered curriculum, on the other hand, the student reads until he understands the work of art to the teacher's satisfaction. On the high school level this approach at its worst

meant six weeks of study on The Tale of Two Cities; on the college level this usually means study until the student can pass a test on whatever interpretations or knowledge the instructor might ask for. Instead of reading The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in order to understand himself and his own century, as he does in the student-centered curriculum, the student reads it to understand Huck Finn and the United States of the pre-Civil War period.

Long before the Dartmouth Conference and the student-centered curriculum, methods teachers had been trying to convince their students that they should not teach to high school students all that they had been taught as college students. The prevalence in the high schools of the immediate past of British and American survey courses attested to the failure of methods teachers. But now a combination of events has led to rather drastic changes -- student militancy, concern for disadvantaged students and non-readers and experimental programs, to name a few. While college departments have capitulated to pressure with a very few new courses such as Black Studies and more world literature courses, high school programs have changed drastically. A quick glance at fall, 1969, English Journals finds discussions and references to such books as the following: Robert Ardrey's African Genesis, John Knowles' A Separate Peace, Dick Gregory's N[redacted]r, William Golding's Lord of the Flies, Uncle Tom's Cabin, Howard Fast's April Morning, Mary Renault's The King Must Die, and J.R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit. How many of these is the young teacher likely to have read in his college training program? There is no assumption here that the young teacher should have read everything he will teach before he goes to his first job, but what happens when there is no commonality between what the student has studied and what the teacher will teach?

The reasons for the differences are evident. The main criterion for choosing works for the college curriculum is quality; the criterion for choosing works for the high school curriculum is primarily relevance. The college curriculum places its faith in works which have survived the test of time; the high school curriculum planners look for the current, the pertinent and the startling. Philosophically, the college curriculum is idealistic, looking for the true, the good, the eternal. The high school curriculum is pragmatic, looking for what works, what turns the student on.

Many have predicted the end of literature teaching in high schools in much the same way that Latin has all but disappeared. More than one administrator, harassed by reading problems and poor literature teaching, has hoped that mass media and technology might make the printed word obsolete. These are dire predictions, and perhaps the student-centered curriculum or literature as a contributor to personal growth is the only way it can survive.

Some have seen the Dartmouth Conference and the student-centered curriculum as a return to Progressive Education, which we rejected in the past. Perhaps this is a phase which will pass. This time, however, we have supporting developments: technology, administratively-promoted experiments such as modular scheduling, concern for the under-privileged, and student militancy, all of which point to greater concern for the individual. And have we not always professed our concern for the individual?

The problem is that the training of teachers for student-centered programs cannot come from the college English departments as they now exist. Perhaps in time conditions will develop a new breed of college literature teacher, but in the meantime where will the high schools look for teachers? If literature proves to be effective in helping students find themselves in our society, high school recruiters may turn to literature teachers with psychology majors, or even better to teachers trained in interdisciplinary programs which would combine work in psychology, counseling, sociology, literature, and group dynamics. At present, however, college English departments as they are, and high school English departments as they are becoming, appear headed in opposite directions.

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