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Johnny, His Teachers, and Their Teachers

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James C. Schaap is a 1970 graduate of Dordt College. He received the M.A. degree in English from Arizona State University, and taught for four years in high schools in Wisconsin and Arizona. He is presently in his second year of teaching at Dordt. In addition, he is working on a collection of pioneer sketches set in the midwest.

Teachers of language, and teachers of the English language especially, can pride themselves on their taking center-stage in the twentieth-century melodrama "The Trials and Tribulations of Johnny the Student." The reviews keep coming, and few, unfortunately, seem to be lauding their performance. Most of America's important news periodicals have evaluated the performance of English teachers on the elementary, secondary, and even college levels, and found their efforts less than adequate. As much from the publicity, "Why Johnny Can't Write" has become a rallying cry for anyone who has any kind of resentment

against formal education—whether his gripe be choice of materials, procedures in the classroom, or the structure of the curriculum.

The critics have, of course, a great deal of evidence to indicate that their condemnation is sound. One could cite the ever-decreasing ACT scores and college placement tests or the surveys done by a variety of organizations, all of which point to the fact that many students are not doing as well as their predecessors, even in the immediate past. But my intent is not to argue over whether standardized tests are true evaluations of student potential—that whole question, in fact, may be part

of the problem. I merely wish to point out that those outside the profession of teaching (the teaching of English especially) are adamant in their accusations and may have good reason for their complaints. Moreover, teachers of other disciplines—history, sciences, math—who seem ever ready to punish English teachers for *all* students' inabilities to write well, have noted unusual declines. An economics teacher at Phoenix (Arizona) East High School, a fifteen-year veteran of the high-school classroom told me that he could see the basic language skills of his students dropping significantly each year. Karl Shapiro epitomizes the problem thus in his essay "Student Illiteracy":

[Writing] programs have corroded steadily and today have reached the point of futility. Students in such programs today, according to my experience all over the United States, can no longer spell, can no longer construct a simple sentence, much less a paragraph, and cannot speak.

However much they rebel at the generalizations made by critics of education, or however unfair they judge standardized tests to be, English teachers must face the fact that there are people all over this nation, people who are presently paying the salaries, who are expecting much more for their educational dollar than their children's skills indicate they are now receiving.

The flood of critical commentary that is prompting people to look more closely at their schools, is bound to create some significant waves, if not inundate educational theory as it applies to English education. Already, many city schools are feeling the push toward more accountability from all teachers, not just those engaged in the teaching of the language. There are signs of unrest in the rural areas as well, and although from a rather informal study of parochial and public schools in northwest Iowa I have found few teachers who have felt real pressures from either parental groups or school boards, it would seem wise for them to

expect that such reaction will come. If it doesn't, it may indicate a pathetic inertia on the part of the school's constituency, causing one to speculate whether anyone reads anything.

That there is a problem is evident. Let me now present a brief view of high-school English education, and then contrast what I have found there with attitudes both toward writing difficulties and toward the language itself that are held by authorities on Johnny's problems. I think you will find, with me, that the gulf which separates the layman from the professor is immense. Then we will look at some of the reasons for that gap, and suggest a few tentative solutions.

Most high schools within easy driving distance of Dordt College have similar English programs. Due primarily to the upheavals of the late 60's, English departments nation-wide moved to what is now commonly called the "elective" system. rural Iowa schools were and are no different. The advantages of the elective program are obvious. The student gets a choice of courses—he is not shoved into a class arbitrarily. In addition, elective courses are often based on social "relevance" (words that echo from the 60's) and provide reading material in a number of "high-interest" areas which were thought to be less important in the past. "Science Fiction," "Literature of the West," "Television and Cinema," "Mystery and Detective Stories" are courses regularly offered by many high schools in an effort to get students to read, if nothing else. The traditional courses, American and English literature, have been reduced to semester courses or nine-week "mini-courses" of the same importance as "The Bible in Literature" or "Women in Literature." Other electives fill out the structure of the curriculum and may provide more traditionally desired experience: "College Writing," "Advanced Grammar," and "World Literature" are examples. Usually, these courses are taken only by the more serious high-school student, or by the one most hounded by parents. In most high schools,

the "relevant" courses are more popular—what high school boy wouldn't prefer Joe Namath's autobiography to *Paradise Lost*, books I and II?

Another advantage of elective programs is their effect on staff members. All teachers are given the opportunity to teach their own speciality; which eliminates the antagonism that can result from tenured staff teaching the "fun" courses, while the young teachers are "stuck" with freshman English or sophomore composition and other such remnants of the past.

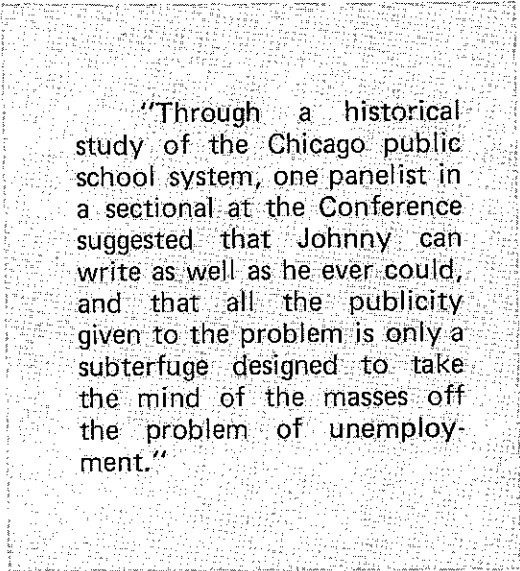
But there are disadvantages, of course. Frequently, elective programs divide writing courses from literature courses. This is not always the case, but in a curriculum that offers both writing and literature courses, a student is likely to get the impression that if he takes a "literature" course, he will not be required to do much writing. Some teachers also point to another problem: in a literature course, some teachers might stress the "experience" of literature, telling the students that their individual reactions are what really count, and minimizing, thereby, precision in the employment of the language used to communicate their experience. That this is self-defeating for an English department is obvious.

The most difficult problem associated with elective programs in English education is that the student receives full responsibility to choose his own program. Some department heads realize that the student is not always capable of making that kind of choice by himself—he will too often, if given the chance, opt for the course which has acquired the reputation of being easiest. Again, this is not always true, but it has been a source of much regret at some schools, as departments find themselves faced with dropping a course such as "Grammar" or "Advanced Composition" or "English Literature" when insufficient numbers of students choose them.

In those schools which have felt renewed community interest because of the publicity given to Johnny's writing pro-

blems, some notable changes are beginning to take place. Two schools in this corner of Iowa have already been urged to redefine their goals more specifically—to sharpen their awareness of the continuity of their programs, and to indicate how day-to-day procedures fit into their objectives. This is good, of course. But more radical changes have already been implemented in a number of schools across the nation.

The Glendale Union High School District in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, has received government funding for a program it calls the Glendale Educational Management Systems (GEMS). Under this program, teachers from all the high schools in the district spent time together formulating goals and identifying specific concepts which they felt should be within



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the range of most students upon completing each year of his high-school career. For example, ninth-grade teachers felt that each freshman should, upon advancement into the tenth grade, be able to identify a noun in a sentence. All ninth-grade teachers in the district, then, armed with this kind of information, formulate their lesson plans to include those skills identified in the

GEMS program for freshmen. The district can, thereby, if it feels the need, guarantee that each student will have acquired those specified skills during that year.

The idea is rooted in accountability, of course, and the GEMS program is only one of many different experiments in accountability that are taking place across the nation—all of them devoted to the idea that the student should receive something from his high-school education besides a diploma, and all of them incited by the publicity that has been given to Johnny's problems (enough publicity to spawn lawsuits in several states). This kind of accountability program is difficult to implement within an elective system.

A point worth mentioning here is that electives have now become rather old fashioned; after all, they have been around for almost ten years already. I was employed in one of the Glendale Union schools from 1974-76, the district's newest school, begun in 1973. Our English curriculum began with a core program for all freshmen, then added another core system for all sophomores. But unlike all the other schools in the district, we did not adopt an elective program. Instead, we initiated a new and highly "imaginative" way of teaching English in the high school. The entire district looked on with interest, wondering whether this new and daring program would succeed. We were told that we were really doing something exciting in the field—we were given that greatest of appellations: "innovative." Our program, you see, consisted of American literature taught to all juniors and English literature taught to all seniors. We were at the forefront of radical change.

The point here is that public awareness of Johnny's problems is, for better or for worse, fostering a return to basic education. The GEMS program for the English curriculum was expressed in traditional grammatical terminology. There was little, if any, input from other studies of language—no one talked of transformational grammar or structural linguistics; after all, nouns, verbs, and participles form a language that

the layman (Mommy and Daddy) will understand. Our highly innovative curriculum was, of course, the standard way back in 1965. Even English department heads in northwest Iowa who maintain that they do not encounter Johnny's writing problems say that the reason for their students' literacy is the traditional grammatical approach taken by elementary schools. Those who do encounter writing problems, on the other hand, blame the elementary schools for moving away from basic language studies or moving to different forms. In short, the direction of public education on the high-school level is "back to basics," whether we like it or not.

With this in mind, we turn our attention to the "establishment" of the profession, the professors at major state universities. I recently attended the annual convention of the four C's (the Conference of College Composition and Communication). The philosophy of language dominant there was much different from that of most parents and school boards. For instance, one spoke there of "standard" English, not of "good" English; of English as a second language, not the improvement of basic English skills; of "bi-dialectalism," not poor usage; in short, of each student's right to his own language (a phrase which titles a well-publicized statement made by the convention two or three years ago).

Through a historical study of the Chicago public school system, one panelist in a sectional at the Conference suggested that Johnny can write as well as he ever could, and that all the publicity given to the problem is only a subterfuge designed to take the mind of the masses off the problem of unemployment. Few of the participants, so it seemed, were willing to admit that a problem really exists today. Some associate the publicity given to falling standards with the fact that more people are attending school now than in the past (an argument which assumes that all those who didn't finish their education, quit because they were not smart enough to graduate); some mentioned that the problem was not really of importance anyway

in this age of electronic communication; and some, as I have already suggested, located the source of the problem in a political plot.

One respondent charged that all the conference participants were hypocritical, for while they extolled each student's right to his own dialect, they all spoke in standard English. To be consistent, this critic maintained, even professors should speak in dialect, or at least use some "non-

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standard" grammatical constructions in discussion. One participant was relieved to hear that she had actually split an infinitive during her presentation, an error truly "of the people."

Here, then, is a major problem. The public demands greater accountability of those teaching English, and it wants that accountability measured by language it can understand—hence the movement "back to basics." Meanwhile, the real pace-setters in the teaching of the language seem to delight in their refusal to believe any of the documentation given to Johnny's inabilities. And the gap widens.

Two reasons for the gap have been given. The first is usually taken by the educated minority, who see the masses as illiterate and uncultured, and, therefore, unfit to critique any of society's problems in a meaningful way. The second is taken by the layman who sees all professors as elitists. Jacob Bronowski, in an essay I recently assigned my freshmen, admits

that scientists (in this case, scientists in the study of the language) have become "specialists," known for their "prim detachment" and "oracular airs." But neither of these criticisms moves us any closer to a solution.

One problem, ironically, is choice of words. While parents want their children to be able to use "good" English, professors refuse to speak in such moralist terms. Because of a relativistic reluctance to name anything inherently "bad" or "good" in today's society, the teachers of the teachers prefer to say that "good" English is something which really doesn't exist, but is only expedient to "getting along" in some segments of society—no more preferable, really, to the particular language which Johnny might use with his friends while repairing his car. But there remains within the older generation, less educated, some might assume, a desire to see their children excel in areas where they may not have had opportunities. When Susan cannot write a sentence, when she spells words incorrectly or has trouble composing a friendly letter, Mom and Dad can't help wondering about education in general. They do not see their children's problems as "expedient," but as very real. Johnny or Susan cannot communicate. There is such a thing as "good" English to Mom and Dad, whether their children's teacher says so or not.

Another reason for the gap between the public and the professor is a kind of institutional repugnance to the teaching of writing. Gene Lyons, in an article in *Harper's* of September, 1976, analyzes this problem by illustrating that few, if any, teachers of English (in this case on the college level) really want to teach anything as "low" as freshman English or composition. The job is usually given to teaching assistants who invariably see their work as part of a ritual proof of "personhood"—if they can survive teaching composition, they are bound for glory. This idea so permeates college English departments, Lyons points out, that it filters down through the undergraduate majors, who feel that they aren't really teaching

English in the high school unless they are teaching literature. Consequently, the continual drive "upward"—a first-year English teacher in any high school will "get stuck" with freshman courses; then he must wait patiently (if he doesn't drop out of the profession first) until he can at last teach the "good" courses at the upper levels. Lyons' point is obviously valid—among English teachers as professionals, there are few who feel they are truly blest unless they are probing the mysteries of *Moby Dick*. As long as these attitudes persist, the public will receive little satisfaction.

The problems that I have outlined are much too great to be solved quickly and painlessly, but what can be done to make a start? All the high-school English teachers that I talked with mentioned that it was important that new teachers be given a much stronger background in the language, that is, a background in grammar, usage, and theory. This is something that can be accomplished without too much difficulty. I find myself agreeing with Gene Lyons when he points out that too much time is spent on literature in an undergraduate curriculum, and that more time must be given to language courses. I believe that upper-level courses in grammar and linguistics should be as much of a graduation requirement for future English teachers as American literature. If the teachers of the future must concern themselves with the problems that the public sees more clearly each day, they must be knowledgeable in language usage and in the analysis and evaluation of composition.

And second, practically, I believe it is the responsibility of all disciplines to teach writing. I know that it is much easier to grade standardized tests or multiple choice-true/false examinations than it is to grade term papers and essay tests, but if college graduates are to be able to use the language proficiently, they must be using it—not only in their English or language courses, but in physics, math, and history. This is as true in the high school as it is in the college. Administrators should urge more teachers of non-language courses to

test by writing and to assign essays and book reviews, for example, because the student who is constantly struggling with the language (and being evaluated on his use of it) is the student who will learn to use it correctly.

Furthermore, all of us should teach our students to appreciate language, to help them see that when it communicates efficiently, it most becomes them as human beings—for it is the use of language which most obviously separates man from the animals. But for future English teachers especially, a love for the language is essential. The student can share that pleasure only when he begins finally to understand for himself how difficult, but also how rewarding it is to make language communicate. Recommendations for teacher candidates should include samplings of student writing. Dordt College requires music majors to perform two recitals before graduation. Yet, all that we require of an undergraduate in English is five to ten essays on literary subjects, most of which rehash some secondary source material. We should make English majors produce with the language—whether it be in drama, poetry, fiction, or original essay—but each major should begin to experience the beauty and strength of language through his own attempts at artistry.

Finally, all college students must learn to respect language, for when it is used with precision and grace, it has great power. Adam's power over the creation is symbolized by his God-given task of naming the creatures beneath him. The witches in *Macbeth* are part of Macbeth's downfall because they speak in half-truths, and Macbeth becomes the victim of their selective use of language. And it is the pigs in *Animal Farm* who maintain control by changing, subtly, the commandments on the barn wall. Students and teachers alike must learn and share respect for words; for to give up precision, clarity, and correctness in our use of language is to deal irresponsibly with a creational gift of God, and to allow others to exploit its vast potential.