THE PARADOX OF THE METHODS TEXT

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Imagine for a moment Louis and Mary Leakey diligently working at their archeological diggings in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania. All of a sudden, the remains of another *Homo habilis* are unearthed, but this time its hand is clutching some ancient petrified tablet. Weeks later, the deciphering completed, the Leakeys make a momentous announcement to the scientific community: the first methods text written by primitive man has been discovered! An artifact of dubious standing in today's world, such a find in the hands of the Leakeys' would certainly lead to a valuable commentary on early man's social conventions. Think what it would reveal about the culture of that time: the socialization process by which the young were inducted into the wisdom of the community, the values inherent in the knowledge system, the status relationships organized around education. Such a far-reaching analysis of the methods text, however, must be left for some other occasion. Here we are simply to consider some of the paradoxes ingrained in the medium of the contemporary methods text espe-
cially when the ground rules of its subject area are undergoing a radical change.

At first glance, the authors of the English methods texts under review here seem to be offering many reasonable and even intelligent proposals about what an English teacher should be doing. Yet in trying to communicate what they take to be the essence of English, all too frequently they are unable to transcend a list of necessary ingredients, unable to get beyond an inventory of instructions to a dramatization of the kind of vital classroom exchanges they are advocating. The paradox I address, of course, is how to talk about a living entity without dissecting it into its supposedly constituent parts; how to present a holistic approach without yielding to the seductive charms of fragmentation. Perhaps an impossible task, maybe as impossible as teaching itself, but necessary certainly if English methods texts are to assist teachers seeking to transform their classrooms into places where students, through the interaction of language and experience, can create ever increasingly more sophisticated models of themselves and their world.

A second major paradox is the mismatch between classroom practices and the rhetoric of reform. Ironically, in writing a book designed to blaze new directions, too many educators tend to fall back on the wornout ways that the teachers they are assailing have fabricated to piece together the diverse world of English. Subsequently, these educators become prisoner to the very categories they are decrying and end up playing the old “if it’s 10:15, it must be spelling” game, despite their stream of caveats to the contrary. Thus, unfortunately, the new progressive synthesis in English education, much heralded in official circles, remains undramatized and consequently unrealized back in the real world of those many English classrooms across the land where teacher-centered and subject-centered practices continue to predominate. In our reading of the following English methods texts these two paradoxes give us one way of judging the relative achievement of each. I will examine, first, the extent to which behaviors belie philosophies, and, second, the degree to which the author’s discourse on method actually enacts an integrated English curriculum.

In their preface to *Teaching English in the Secondary School*, Robert Parker and Maxine Daly set themselves on the side of the angels. “This book,” they claim, “represents our attempt to speak to the problems of fragmentation, boredom; and human waste which characterize so much of the English ‘teaching’ in urban high schools” (p. vii). Further we are told, “all English teaching grows from a firm belief in the essential worth and dignity of each human being in each English classroom . . . [where] the English teacher has a unique opportunity to respond personally and usefully to the most pressing kinds of questions that students ask” (pp. vii-viii). Such talk appears to be pointing directly to an integrated curriculum in English. Unfortunately, before their statement is finished, a more prosaic concern is raised and the preface ends on a note of foreboding:
Further, the English teacher has the responsibility for developing the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical evaluation, all prime requisites for operating successfully in modern society" (p. viii). There's the rub. Certainly communication skills are not to be denied, but once they receive priority (and it is significant that here they are mentioned last so as to resonate throughout the book) any concern for the lives of the students and their crucial questions ends up being pushed aside. There's just not enough time for that when we must prepare them for the real world.

The opening chapter surveys the "Young People and Their Environment"—the authors are specifically addressing urban teachers of the "disadvantaged." Most striking are the voices of the children themselves as they reveal the condition of their lives: "Jonathan, age sixteen: 'Peoples shooting up everybody and things. Saturday after last we went to a death party. We stayed to dance at the end. We started to go home. This man come up to this boy. I don't know why—anyway he stabbed the boy in the back' " (p. 13). The authors' picture of the plight of these young people is not necessarily inaccurate, yet they fail to recognize deeper reasons why these youths might be at odds with the educational institution. This means the authors show no sensitivity to the inherent political struggle between the culture of the street and the culture of the school, the battle between the dispossessed and the powerful. Furthermore, by ignoring these fundamental issues their subsequent curricular proposals tend to be patronizing and ethnocentric in the sense that their plans are more concerned with rescuing than with ensuring development and raising consciousness.

In the second chapter, "The Nature of English: Toward a Developmental View," the skills model of English, which compartmentalizes the subject into grammar and literature lessons and places the student in a passive role, is soundly rejected. In replacing it with the personal growth model, the authors point wisely to the need for the child to participate actively in the curriculum through lots of talk and the presentation of personal experiences. In the classroom, where a sense of community is created and students are encouraged to develop their own styles, "they can truly take in and be influenced by the fictional representations of others" (p. 54). Thus the means to this end of understanding self and others—the skills mentioned at the end of the preface—are relegated to their proper place as servants, not masters. Along this line it is worth noting the authors' criticism of James Moffett's conception of the English curriculum. After citing his many contributions, including his stress on verbal activity, they conclude that he is ultimately a "skills man" with a scheme "essentially mentalistic and quite manipulative" (p. 46). The judgment is revealing if unconvincing. One can view Moffett in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* as yet another Aristotelian striving for the ultimate system; however, we must look beyond this to the rich and varied
materials and experiences provided in his other books to see that his main concern is focussing on the child. In spite of this quarrel, by the end of two chapters we are ready to join Parker and Daly on the exciting journey toward a more humanistic English curriculum.

We never reach the promised land. The remaining chapters—“Making Teaching More Student-centered,” “Planning for English Work,” “Working with Language,” “Film in the English Classroom,” and “Staying Alive in the Classroom”—are replete with old saws and inconsistencies. Moreover, whatever collaboration had existed between the two authors gradually breaks down. Recommendations abound, such as procedures for grouping and independent study, but they are merely techniques offered randomly with no integrating function in mind. How, for instance, is the proper moment for their use governed by the questions and issues being raised in class? Furthermore, advice like “a good technique, therefore, is to group students in twos and have them work with each other in a variety of ways” (p. 69) leaves Parker and Daly open to the charge they leveled earlier at Moffett; means become ends as the enthusiastic progressive teacher decides, “Well, this week why don’t I try grouping: I’ve had enough of these individual projects.” Yes, we must have these skills in our repertoire, but it is the duty of the methods text to provide us with a whole narrative which shows them in action. Techniques given in a vacuum are of little help; indeed, they can be misleading.

All the discrepancies between rhetoric and practice cannot be spelled out here. Searching for relevant personal growth activities, we are more likely to run across the deciphering of the Lord’s Prayer in Old English (p. 143) or a mini “parts of speech” lesson (p. 148). When it comes to literature, we are offered both the old and the new standbys, Great Expectations and Catcher in the Rye. They warn that literature must not be “turned into a series of sterile things to be scrutinized and analyzed in a passionless process that quite ignores the reader’s response” (p. 133). But then they turn around and organize literature into short stories, novels, and plays—the old genre trick. Most offensive, however, is their condescending analysis of language. After some promising remarks regarding the acceptance of the student’s language, suddenly appears a list headed, “Deviations from Standard English Among Tenth Graders” (p. 150). Thus we read “lack of agreement between verb and subject,” not “different agreement”; and all this is followed by the amazing suggestion that students might listen to recorded speeches of famous Americans. Perhaps motivation to learn the standard dialect can be tied to patriotism. By the time we get to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a Dream” speech where we are looking for “figures of speech,” all sense of human issues seems to be lost.

Further contradictions exist as the class bias, alluded to earlier, begins to creep in. When, for instance, individual projects are proposed, they have a distinct vocational link: “In a class of thirty, for example, eight
might want to be clerks, typists, or stenographers; their project might be to prepare their own book on business letters, while those in the woodshop might be developing (writing) their own manual for a woodworking course" (p. 64). Where are the doctors and lawyers? This, naturally, is a "slow" class, but what happened to the talk about unlocking the potential of these urban youths? Instead, here we seem to be keeping them in their place.

A final challenge to Parker and Daly's credibility is the fact that more than one third of the text consists of pilfered (though acknowledged) lesson plans and commentaries by other teachers. One would not find this so objectionable if the material functioned to illustrate key points being made by the authors themselves, but, for one exception, where we catch a glimpse of some real life as a student teacher tries to introduce drama into her classroom just the opposite is true. For example, they give us two film units after saying "we do not believe in 'film units' as such, just as we do not believe in poetry units or grammar units. Film should be a natural and constant part of the ongoing life of English classes as should poetry and song and drama and talk about language in operation in people's lives" (p. 164). Nor can this hodgepodge be glued together with the several good ideas in the concluding chapter (like inviting a fellow teacher in to observe your class). Parker and Daly fail to enact the personal growth model they purportedly advocate and so our image of it, at least after reading their methods text, remains undefined.

In Reading for Teaching English in Secondary Schools Theodore Hippie is also striving to chart a new course for English education, one where learning is process-centered, not product-centered. Early, however, he serves notice that his heart is not really tuned to the struggle for radical reform, but rather is tempered to a more moderate course of inaction: "One must remember that most students today attend schools not very different from those their parents attended. One must also remember that educational change is slow. It is for teachers of today's students in today's climate of educational change that I write this book. It is a book for this and the next decade" (p. ix). Nevertheless, Hippie does envision, in his opening chapter on "The Place of English," a curriculum that integrates the diverse elements of English: "Current thinking in English education . . . usually agrees that language, composition, and literature should coexist within the same classroom, whenever possible on the same day [itals. mine]. Thus, the student reads a poem (literature), analyzes the linguistic forms the poet has used (language), and writes something about the poem (composition)—all within the same day's lesson" (p. 11).

The integration is never attained. From the beginning, Hippie misconceives his task as the naming of parts. Among his twenty chapters we run the gauntlet from "Curriculum Patterns, Year Plans, and Unit Plans" and "The Structure of Literature" to "Language Study: Grammar and Usage" and "The Literature and Language of Black Students." In covering all this
material, Hippie the moderate tends to hedge on reform in order to become all things to all teachers. Pick and choose as you will. And frequently we come across a not unintelligent remark: reading must be pleasurable and grow out of the student's concerns . . . compositions can be spurred on by pre-writing discussions on salient issues . . . teachers talk too much. Yet inexorably the Old Guard lingers in the wings even while good sense is performing on stage. We are, for instance, admonished, “Telling Johnny he ought to secure The Three Musketeers and read it is one thing; actually giving Johnny a copy he may take home that very evening is quite another” (p. 66). True, but what, might I ask (with all due apologies to Alexander Dumas), is The Three Musketeers doing here? And perhaps because he has refused to argue decisively for the integrated English he desires, Hippie slips into the tired clichés of the trade: “Such a procedure ignores an important aspect of the behavior of adolescent school children—they have rather short attention spans” (p. 40), or: “There is also some merit to the notion of lecturing occasionally to college-bound students, as the lecture will be the dominant classroom tactic they will encounter in college” (p. 45). Even the spectre of covering material creeps in: “no teacher should feel remiss if he has to shorten the unit on Romeo and Juliet in order to spend a few more days on the newspaper lessons or to show some short, student-made films” (p. 243). Finally, he provides an astounding defense of homogeneous grouping: “But a heterogeneous school population can provide many opportunities in lunchrooms and libraries and gymnasiums for the Harvard-bound lad to meet the future school dropout; they do not need to sit opposite each other in all of their classes” (p. 251).

All this is unfortunate. Hippie has a deserved reputation as a creative teacher, but in this book he seldom gets beyond his lists: literature gets divided into novels, poems and plays; composition into words, sentences, and paragraphs; and mass media into newspapers, films, and television. The context and reason for an activity vanishes. This gap is nowhere better illustrated than in Appendix C, “Samples of Student-Written Compositions,” which “are presented here to give readers a chance to try their hand at theme evaluation” (p. 313). Hippie surely does not want us to separate English from life, yet how can we evaluate these pieces of writing without some reconstruction of the issues and assignments that generated them? Were Hippie to describe his own teaching behavior, we would see an example of what we have been looking for, something much superior to the thirteen typical teachers he sketches in chapter 2. But with such traditional teaching models as a baseline, Hippie himself gets mired in the past. What is left is an interesting artifact for the anthropologist about what really goes on in the classroom: “Should the student who disrupts class be given a lower grade than he would have received had he not been a ‘discipline problem’? What about grading the girl who chews gum? The boy who sleeps in class?” (p. 293). Yes, these are real situations and
problems faced by English teachers in today's schools, and Hippie does, of course, insist that he is not addressing some future utopia, yet, in sticking so close to this world he leaves us little hope for escaping its practices. Indeed, he denies the very integration and imagination he argues for in the first place and no doubt exhibits in his own encounters with students.

In his forward to *Exploring Language with Children* by John Warren Stewig, Robert C. Pooley begins with a lively anecdote about a first grade classroom. The teacher released a caged pigeon and the children excitedly followed its progress around the room. Upon recapturing the bird the teacher simply asked, "What did you see?" and was deluged by animated responses. Next came a transition to writing a story about what they had seen. The children caught up in the experience of the moment got busily to work. Pooley continues:

After a time, a boy raised his hand and asked the question, "What do you call the color of the pigeon's neck? One minute it is pink, then it is blue, and then kind of mixed." The teacher replied, "You mean iridescent?" "Yes," said the boy, "that's it. How do you spell it?" The teacher wrote "iridescent" on the chalkboard. This boy and several other pupils observed in their stories that the neck of the pigeon was iridescent.

He then concludes with an unobtrusive analysis:

[The teacher] had first created a situation providing a novel and exciting experience. She terminated the experience while interest and excitement were at their height. She encouraged oral response, and with subtle leadership, got the children to cover the range of the experience. Yet she terminated the speaking while the interest was still high, turning the children naturally and easily to writing. So motivated they wrote beyond normal expectation in both quantity and quality of statement (p. viii).

At its best, this is the total-program approach and Stewig has certainly packed his book with a variety of rich activities based upon what we know about the coherent organization of the curriculum in light of how children learn and how they develop linguistically.

Following the first chapter with its succinct summary of the linguistic principles underlying the rest of the book, is a chapter written by Dorothy Huenecke which serves to ground the various teaching acts in a systematic framework. The next chapter, "Language in Early-Childhood Education" by Harlan and Ruth Hansen, offers a sound overview of the component parts that must be integrated into a whole language learning environment that emphasizes exploration and discovery on the part of children. From here on we find the old format in chapters on Listening and Handwriting and Spelling and Vocabulary, which precede the final chapter, "Language and the Disadvantaged," also authored by Ms. Huenecke. One cannot deny that there are many useful things for the teacher here in addition to
a continuing critical examination of why such things are worth doing. Yet the wholeness of Pooley's original image somehow gets lost, because the book functions more as a resource than as a methods text. For instance, if a teacher wanted to check some of the recent research on teaching handwriting, Stewig would be a good first stop.

In spite of all the sources Stewig refers to, Exploring Language with Children is strangely parochial. James Moffett's work is only mentioned in passing; all the important British work on drama and children's writing seems not to exist; and where are such creative ventures as the Teachers & Writers Collaborative? The book suffers from fragmentation, not only in the chapter format, but in the mini-unit descriptions that appear after chapters 6, 7 and 9. In "An Integrated Language-Arts Unit," which does contain a good running commentary on working creatively with a total class project, we get "building interest in poetry" and a biographical sketch of the life of C. S. Lewis. Further this fragmentation can be seen in such opposing labels as creative vs. practical writing and in the author's concluding remarks in the spelling chapter: "The author's feeling that the act of writing is more important than the skill areas is reflected in the placement of the three previous chapters" (p. 316). We don't need apologies, but rather more examples of integration like the one Pooley so marvelously captured in his "iridescent" anecdote. For the problem remains: how can we build skills while dealing with stimulating content? Finally, it must be noted that this book is about language, not about literature—a fact that only becomes clear, however, when we get lost in the middle of chapter 10, "Learning about Language through Literature" by the Hansens. The purpose behind the readings they are discussing is to inquire into the language patterns of various social and ethnic groups. From this perspective, human issues become subordinate, and yet another burdensome dichotomy is forced on the language environment of the child.

The concluding chapter on teaching the disadvantaged does provide a necessary final perspective: "Disadvantaged students profit from good teaching just as more advantaged students do. This book suggests many good strategies for teaching language to students. All of the suggestions can be incorporated into teaching the disadvantaged because the basic principles of good teaching are applicable to any level of learning at any socio-economic level" (p. 426). Certainly good integrated teaching could grow out of the many proposals contained in this book, but how is the novice to put it all together?

Stephen Judy's attempt at solving the methods paradox is the most successful. Although some fragmented categories remain, Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English is the most consistent attempt to push English reform in a unified direction. In his introduction, Judy sets forth three necessary qualifications for the kind of English teaching he advocates. First, it is experiential and based on the personal growth model. Second, the quest for change is filled with numerous pitfalls and one
should reach out for support from those of a similar persuasion. Lastly, there are no miracle formulas; all teachers should seek an individual style which fits them best.

In his opening section, "Aims and Issues in Teaching English," Judy presents an encapsulated history of the teaching of English. This perspective shows that many current trends toward honoring the child's experience have their roots in earlier practices. Next, Judy characterizes the teaching that he is attacking as being based on adult standards; this allows him a critique of much of what passes for change today: "Whether using the new technology or the old, paperbacks or hardback anthologies, teachers have consistently and steadfastly had the adult standard in mind" (p. 30). As Judy rightfully points out, new packages do not always contain new products. In contrast to this, Judy offers his own definition: "A central aim for the English teacher must be to help each student participate in the community of language to the fullest possible extent by providing situations and experiences which allow him to use language naturally and pleasurably" (p. 31). He concludes this section with two additional considerations, "The Question of Standards" and "The Search for Structure," which nicely anticipate the various deadends inherent in the drive for change. Structure, for instance, is seen as very much a red herring issue because structures are not always what they appear to be. Thus we should keep in mind: "Structures should be subtractive, not additive" and "Structures are for [the benefit of] students, not for [the benefit of] teachers" (p. 59).

The second section, "English in the Schools," begins smartly with suggestions on how the teacher might begin to transform his class of individuals into a language community. The remainder of the section deals decisively with the experiential approach in both "The Process of Composing" and "Personal Engagement with Literature," as Judy maintains his balance amid the problems that arise in implementing the new curriculum. He argues, for instance, that although writing grows out of experience and should not be imposed, still, the teacher must avoid "leaving the students utterly in a vacuum" (p. 89). Furthermore, lost of new gimmicks, such as the journal, must be put into a necessary context: "In many schools, in fact, the journal has been so overworked that it no longer provides a satisfying experience for students. As often happens with educational innovations, we have emphasized the trimmings (the looseleaf binding and diary format) and ignored the essence of the journal (its freedom and naturalness)" (p. 87). When it comes to literature, Judy is also clear that what we don't need is a meta-language: "one does not have to use formal analytic terms to help students 'see' the parts of a story. 'Why do you think he reacted that way?' is simply a low-key way of talking about 'character motivation'—a term of dubious usefulness to most students. They can recognize motivation without going through the process of labeling it" (p. 122). Also, the literature lesson (which is really the
English lesson) should be organized around issues, not genre or themes:

“In the thematic approach the central idea or theme is often treated as a
critical tool—with 'courage' or 'love' or 'the unknown' seen as a key to un-
locking the meaning of texts. In such situations, the students simply be-
come theme hunters, and they still do not bring their own personal experi-
ence to bear on the text” (p. 136). Similarly, we must underscore Judy’s
important point about integration: “The nonprogram in reading becomes
a nonprogram in writing as well, thus reintegrating English into a single
topic rather than a fragmentary collection of skill activities” (p. 142).

The final section, “Problems and Perplexities,” opens with a lively chap-
ter on the environment of the classroom and lots of ideas on how to deco-
rate it so as not to leave it in the dreary state that characterizes the activi-
ties of traditional classrooms. This is followed by two chapters with ex-
cellent commentaries on the spoken language of the classroom and crea-
tive drama. In the latter, we are even coached in puppetry, which adds a
refreshing counterpoint to the overworked role-playing and improvisation
that for the most part make up the new child-centered creative dramatics
flowering recently. Then comes a chapter on “English: A Mass Medium”
in which Judy once again shows that he’s done his homework: “If you are
in an area that has cable TV—CATV—the regulations of the Federal Com-
 munications Commission require that some cable channels be left to free
public access. This means that your students can have their tapes shown—
free—and sent into thousands of homes. Check with the local cable au-
thority for details and procedures” (p. 220).

In the final chapter, “Working Over the System (Before It Works You
Over),” we have the key to Judy’s success. He really does want a new En-
glish and is willing to fight for it. Consider these two remarks: “If a school
has already committed itself to accountability, minimum compliance will
often satisfy the administration without causing the teacher to take his en-
tire curriculum from outside sources.” and “When an administrator tells
you he wants a list of behavioral objectives, ask to see his!” (p. 259). The
reform rhetoric of our other authors pales when compared to that. Simi-
larly, in a preceding chapter Judy does not buckle under to the gram-
marians as he offers “Twenty-one Alternatives to the Teaching of Gram-
mar.” By refusing to stick to the categories of the enemy, Judy has initi-
ated another new front in the continuing battle for more humanistic
approaches to English.

Yet, even Judy with all his good ideas (and little boxes with quotable
quotes by other educators), misses the opportunity to present a sustained
narrative which would more fully dramatize the kind of English teaching
his book certainly encourages. And this is surely something within his
power, since his lists and conclusions have grown out of his own imagina-
tive teaching experience.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking to expect a methods text to combine a
theoretical analysis with a practical enactment of actual teaching. But
what we need are presentations, not more taxonomies. We need to be shown, not told, if we are to catch a glimpse of the drama that exists when successful teaching-learning is occurring, if we are to see that one's acts as a teacher are more than an abstracted set of gimmicks and principles. One way of capturing this drama would be through an elaboration of what we might call the "myth" of the English classroom. This much abused term must seem out of place here, but I am thinking of a particular connotation Geoffrey Hartman points to in Beyond Formalism: "A myth mediates a discontinuity—winter, death, paradise lost, temps perdu—and its very movement, the narrative, is a series of bridges over a gulf. Myth participates in what Van Gennep has called a right of passage." Surely the experience of English should reflect such discontinuities for these are what characterize our very existences. Pulled between competing perceptions, ideologies, loyalties, our wholeness is constantly threatened for learning's sake. Tensions are continually being resolved, only to cycle again into new and greater tensions. And in the midst of this apparent chaos, this endless discontinuity between birth and death, we create our own personal myths to gather together the threads of our lives.

The embodiment of the myth of the English classroom would be of great value to all teachers who continue to question and refine what it is they are about. In providing for their transaction with the life it captures, this embodiment would challenge teachers to explicitly construct their own unique myths. Such a process also holds great promise for the training of student teachers. For them we need to present a whole picture of English before we break it up into various entities. Given a methods text that contains a narrative—a myth—a group of perspective teachers could, with the aid of an advisor, begin to extract their own versions of the meanings and the techniques that make up English. By presenting a teaching narrative (such as Sylvia Ashton-Warner's Teacher, George Dennison's The Lives of Children, or James Herndon's How to Survive in Your Native Land, among others) the methods text could show how the three components vital to learning in English might be established in a classroom: the creation of a context, which demonstrates the trust the teacher has in the integrity of the students, which leads to the building of a community—something all our authors say they desire. Furthermore, the teacher can be seen realistically as the mediating figure who initiates and stands between the tensions and contradictions that exist when learning is occurring in the English classroom. In pursuing such inquiry, however, we must be careful to maintain a balanced perspective on all the myths that will vie for our allegiance because, as a quick glance at the history of English teaching in America shows, fundamental issues remain unresolved and contradiction is the rule rather than the exception.

Given this scheme of things, we would now ask Stephen Judy, for example, to write a companion volume in which he narrates the unique myth
he personally has created to unite the disparate elements and demands that comprise the rich world of English. The completion of such a work would be one way of overcoming the paradox of fragmentation and who should be better equipped to do this than the English teacher: someone who daily is intimate with literature—that which dramatizes and explores the endless contradictions of our human condition.