It would be easy to ramble on against the accumulated abuses of the modern age, even if one was not suffering from a bad case of nostalgia. Take science and technology. Here we have “advances” constantly being made, but where do they all lead? Why does Detroit offer so few options to its gas-guzzling monsters when years ago the know-how for a more economical engine existed? With a moon landing behind us, why are we still being herded into antique subway cars? With our understanding of nutrition ever on the increase, why do short-order food chains increasingly dominate the landscape? Special interests keep getting in the way to be sure, yet it is frustrating watching the gap widen between our knowledge base and our end products.

Although I am no conservative in these matters, it is my contention that we have run into a similar problem with elective programs in English. The significant humanistic and communal gains made in our discipline during the past fifteen years are being subverted by the majority of English elective programs, because, finally, these programs keep the gains from touching the lives of our students.

Before elaborating my arguments, let me admit that under certain circumstances elective programs have been an advance over the antiquated programs and approaches they replaced. Although a great deal of the enthusiasm generated by the new programs is no doubt attributable to some Hawthorne effect where anything new and experimental registers significant gains over the old methods, elective programs did make fresh options possible. More significantly, where elective programs grew from within, rather than being imposed from without, the opportunity to experiment forced some English faculties into examining the fundamental assumptions underlying their teaching of English. This led on the one hand to various faddish and bizarre packages; on the other hand it extended the boundaries of English. Teachers were trying new things and this made the English classroom once again an exciting and vital place to inhabit.

Unfortunately, however, despite slogans of “relevance,” “individualization,” “creativity” and the like, many new programs all too quickly constructed their own procrustean beds. Making each teacher responsible for their own series of electives had disastrous effects on teacher-teacher interaction. Contrary to the new emerging model of English, which was moving in the direction of cooperative planning and execution, elective systems simply reinforced the age-old status quo so characteristic of our schools. With teachers working apart rather than together, the model of collaborative growth and change was lost. Teachers, isolated in their own little cubicles of expertise, were able to get about the business of doing what they felt most comfortable with, but this time they had jazzy new titles.

But besides supporting conservative teacher behavior, elective programs took a step backward in terms of student participation. First, electives sometimes pandered to students' fleeting interests rather than meeting their more important needs and concerns. Second, what had been a true chance for student involvement in the planning and decision making process, whereby the curriculum was in part a cooperative venture, ended up with student participation being little more than the endless filling out of questionnaires—which the teachers could then sort on their own in order to slot in the “appropriate” courses. The new student freedom thus consisted of choosing one's own English course, not aiding in the planning of it, and consequently a new cohesive device was set into motion: “It was your decision to take this course, so don’t complain to me about it.” Along these lines, one of our doctoral students was recently ecstatic about being able to teach a “Women and Literature” course in her school; yet, at the same time she was upset about the possibility of its being canceled because no students were signing up. She had no realization that she had left the students completely out of her elaborate preparations. Women’s studies were in the air and she thought because this was her interest it would make a good product to sell and teach. Of course, if the planning had been the joint effort I am advocating, her population for the elective would already have been there.

English teachers as a group have always raised one of the most vociferous voices against our materialistic times and the subsequent debasement of our human values. Toward the end of buy, buy, buy it was easy to identify advertising as an evil to be attacked, and thus it became part of the teachers’ sacred trust to
distinctions between two broad types of curriculum, our discipline. Yet what are elective programs if not a massive marketing operation for bored and alienated consumer-students. We are in fact reinforcing the idea that the students are buying a product, that they should shop around, that one package will be more glamorous than another. Now consumer education is very necessary in our modern society, but elective programs do not further such sensitivity; rather, they indoctrinate. Instead of offering a truly free supply and demand market where the producer feels some pressure to turn out the best product possible, most elective programs perpetuate window dressing, not a real concern for educational contents.

One of the most widely publicized of these programs offers thirty-five different courses for students in the last three years of high school, including “Vocational English” (how to get a job), “Ideas and Ideals” (philosophy), “Fundamental English” (skills), “Basic Communication” (the mass media), “Filmmaking,” “Composition,” “Language and Behavior,” and “Independent Study” (or, what you will). Thirty-five assorted varieties. Some state departments list hundreds of courses in English. Such proliferation masquerades as satisfying student “demands” for choice which raises the image so pleasing to Madison Avenue eyes of youth hustling about the market place. Yet another irony exists here. It is the teachers who frequently cater to themselves: Their “special interests,” their secret yearnings to be literary scholars have become another crutch for sticking with the product-oriented curriculum and avoiding the risks of the humanistic process-oriented curriculum.

It is, finally, not the failure of electives in practice that is most damning (a failure noted in many recent articles—see especially the review of George Hillocks’ findings in the May, 1974, English Journal); rather, it is a conceptual failure that is responsible for their being so antithetical to progress in English education. In attempting to lower the interface between secondary education and the university, and thus appearing outwardly more sophisticated by mistakenly adopting the university’s idea of electives, we have ignored the fact that the most important educational innovations of the recent past have originated on the underside of the interface in the schools, not the colleges. For evidence of this we need look no further than Dewey’s lab school or the significant infant school movement in Great Britain today. On the other hand, the collegiate model with few exceptions has had a conservative influence on the curriculum and on teaching practices. Further, there is a sound conceptual basis for deciding not to borrow university procedures and packaging practices for reorganizing the delivery systems in our discipline.

Let us consider, for instance, some important distinctions between two broad types of curriculum, between two differing ways of organizing the world of educational knowledge. First we have a “compartmentalized” approach. This approach divides disciplines and subjects into their individual fiefdoms. The major result of the isolationist autonomy of these educational units is that learning becomes a matter of content accumulation, teaching becomes didactic, and teaching-learning relationships authoritarian. We do not have to go far to recognize those college departments jockeying for power. Indeed, academic struggles are on the increase in these days of budget slashes and faculty cutbacks.

A contrasting approach to the nature of educational knowledge might be termed “integrated.” Here processes are emphasized, as the learner focuses on interrelationships. The teacher is seeking to guide, to create groupings which are self-regulated, not teacher-dominated. The tendency is toward generalists, not narrow specialists, and this in turn leads to more open academic behavior and questioning. Subsequent changes in the school environment also occur in a shift from the “compartmentalized” to the “integrated” approach. Flexibility, openness, and cooperation (working together, teachers of different subjects now see larger organizing themes such as Man: A Course of Study) replace an atmosphere characterized by gossip, competition, intrigue, and an air of conspiracy.

Unfortunately, we suffer from a schizoid dilemma. On the one hand our rhetoric (“the whole child” and “personal growth”) suggests a progressive stance toward the education of children; on the other hand, our practices too frequently belie our words. Below the interface we have had successful integrated approaches to learning in the schools. Conversely, above the interface, the university remains the bastion of the compartmentalized approach. Regrettably, it is not an easy transition from one approach to the other, because people in schools must radically alter the ways in which they interact with each other. Still, this is no reason for marching backward.

What implications does this compartmentalized/integrated distinction hold for elective programs as a viable delivery system for English today? It seems to me that post-Dartmouth English has sought to transform the relationships between students and teachers, while integrating the disparate elements of our discipline. Language, literature, and composition were to be parts of a whole as teachers collectively planned activities that facilitated a student’s creation and exploration of a unique voice. In other words, our growth hopefully has been away from fragmented experiences which separated speaking from listening, reading from writing, and so on. Presumably we were moving in the direction of an integrated approach. As I have been arguing, however, the elective program in at least two respects leads us inexorably in the opposite direction back to
the compartmentalized approach: Formally separating “Creative Writing,” “Senior Language Arts Skills,” “Man in the Satiric Mode,” “The Art of the Short Story,” “The Quest for Identity,” and “Ghosts, Ghouls, and Goblins,” despite the yearly shuffle, finally serves to maintain the boundaries between ourselves and within our discipline.

Yet an integrated approach requires, of course, an integrating idea. One must have some notion or larger question of inquiry in mind if one is going to cross and break down barriers. We overlook this need in our mad rush to solve the pressing procedural concerns of our profession whether they be “behavioral objectives,” “censorship,” or “multiple-choice testing.” All very interesting, but as issues they are only manageable in relation to whatever unified context we have set for ourselves as English teachers. Unfortunately, our acts of self-definition are few and too frequently result in little more than purple prose. This lack of an integrating idea, I maintain, has impeded real progress in the English curriculum; and, ironically, the potpourri of the elective program, by attempting to organize a “freer” curriculum, has ended by adding to our difficulty in realizing our discipline’s central principles. We have lingered too long under the mistaken notion that we could avoid being rigid and monolithic by being instead all things to all people. We should have been building a cohesive definition of what it is we are trying to accomplish as English teachers. Without advocating a new orthodoxy here, we might subsume a wide variety of practices under such an umbrella definition as “English is the experience of literature (conceived broadly both in a receptive and productive mode) which fosters an individual’s personal and social growth.” By sharing the efforts necessary to understand and refine such an idea we might more honestly use the riches of our idiosyncrasies rather than farm them out to the do-your-own-thing world of electives.

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