The hidden agenda of English I

During the last twenty years I have spent not a little time trying to puzzle out the significance of having to confront the particular stance toward language and knowledge occasioned by English 1-2. Like many other graduates who bemoaned its loss I had come to see this course as a symbol of the "critical thinking" that Amherst tried to be responsible for in my ongoing education. But while favoring its return or at least being critical of the English Department for interrupting its presence at the College, I had gradually been won over to the persuasion of many of the faculty who argued that my image of 1-2 was slipping into nostalgia, the actual course being much less perfect than imagined. For sure enough the present is always deteriorating and it's comforting to have a visionary image of some ideal coherent moment in one's past and to be able to share that moment in a sense of communion with other graduates of the same institution. Yet times and conditions had supposedly changed and the kind of authority, privilege, and elitism represented in 1-2 was no longer tenable. And if all we wanted was to improve the writing skills of succeeding generations of Amherst students then surely there were more efficient ways than hanging on to the memory of 1-2.

But the idea of 1-2 lingers still and as I deconstruct its influence on what I take to be the essence of an (or at least my) Amherst education I increasingly see it as having played a central role in helping acculturate students intellectually to what has been called the postmodernist sensibility. This epistemological perspective suggests that our worlds or realities are socially constructed, not objectively given. In these worlds we derive meaning on the basis of shifting contexts and loyalties, so always we need to be concerned with acts of definition for in our definitions lie our attainment of integrity and responsibility. As such our sanity rests on being comfortable with a variety of selves or social roles, all of which add up to our need to take irony seriously as a stance toward the contradictions and complexities of contemporary culture.

It is this transactional relationship between knower and known that English 1-2 served to foster and we see this intellectual tradition permeating the academy in every direction from George Herbert Meade and Peter Berger in sociology to Jerome Bruner and George Kelly in psychology, from John Dewey and Margorie Grene in philosophy to Albert Einstein and Michael Polanyi in science. And in the arts or literary studies. from Louise Rosenblatt to Wolfgang Iser, we have once again discovered the role of the reader in the making of meaning. So while English 1-2 perhaps needed to maintain the fiction of being a course about writing, it really only worked when its subject concentrated on the peculiar ways students came to terms with their knowledge. And, of course, why "critical thinking" kept cropping up as a hidden agenda of 1-2 was because this knowledge relationship.
was always being rendered problematic by whatever set of assignments the faculty had engineered for that year. Clichés, in other words, were never allowed to be taken for granted — English was never rewarded.

The kind of writing demanded of us by the course, we later came to find out, was not writing at all in the normal conduit or communication sense. (And Amherst seemed to lead the way on this insight that messages are never merely matters of invisible transmission, but always involve slippage and translation.) Rather writing was about something having to do with our linguistic representations of our experience (slippery word) which were finally equivalent to our mental maps of the interior and exterior worlds. And how we resisted, sensing in some way that our very character was on display. Thus 1-2 represented a fundamental effort on the part of the English faculty of the college to ensure that as students we had some experience with reflecting on the nature of how our minds create knowledge, which is to say how knowledge involves acts of interpretation. We were coming to understand the importance of being able to move from a belief in final absolutes to what William Perry has described as committed relativism or valued skepticism.

But beyond these flights of intellectual passion, there are two further considerations regarding the value of 1-2, however inaccurately I might be remembering it. First is the idea that one of the reasons for attending a place like Amherst is to share certain learning moments with your entire class. We all know that despite the importance of the myriad rich ingredients that Amherst contributed to our education in terms of faculty and facilities, what mattered most of all was having to live and learn beside lots of other talented and inquisitive students. From this perspective there is a real loss when it is no longer the case that all members of a class can on occasion know they are struggling with the same problem or assignment. That marked the commonality of our diversity at Amherst. Nor should such moments be confused with one of the chief attacks on a core curriculum, namely, that in this age of an accelerating knowledge explosion, where even the latest paradigm is under attack, who can presume to say to any college student what he or she should study or know. Such an argument misses the key to the core curriculum experience at Amherst. The piece of knowledge being obtained was only an excuse for a far more important quest, one which involved belonging to a community of persons who continually cared about inquiring into the shifting and elusive ways we have of knowing.

Secondly, the flip side holds true for faculty conversation. When an entire department has to mediate their differences in order to get on with the offering of a required course, they become accountable for the kinds of learning or knowing that their discipline is organized around. There are obviously many versions of the encounters, both private and public, that occurred during the years of the ongoing constructing and nurturing of 1-2. But of paramount importance was the participation of all the faculty of the department, regardless of rank or status, so that dialogues around and resistances to the core course could in turn inform the branches of specialty teaching. Inevitably, faculty like students will protest, trotting out the virtues of being able to do their own thing, but we hardly have here an instance of the imposition of an either/or curriculum; rather, when faculty endeavors like English 1-2 are an active part of the life of the college, the educational enterprise in the best post modernist sense becomes a both/and proposition.

Perhaps, however, the historical moment for implementing a commonly taught English course is gone forever — the time when a set of social constraints and arrangements served to coerce new faculty into a way of sharing their responsibility for working collaboratively with their colleagues to solve however temporarily the problem of what gets taught in the curriculum. In short it may simply be the case that competing factions as Madison assert-

ed, rule all human affairs, even in the academy, and that force of personality (some would call it tyranny) as we saw it in someone like a Theodore Baird has been discredited forever. To regain such a time is presumably to imagine that the illusion of coherence is worth pursuing not as a blind for the shocking discontinuities around us, but as a trust for the possibilities of wider human discourse. For surely a department faculty honed in their specialties of increasingly narrow expertise, though they may shudder at the prospect (and I share these feelings accustomed as I am to hiding behind the mantle of academic freedom), is properly humbled at having to work together en masse in a spirit of compromise over imperfect and even fleeting solutions to the problem of what and how to teach the young.

Still, I continue to bemoan the loss of English 1-2, though I secretly take comfort in the fact that maybe after all Amherst is not yet beyond catching up to its own past.

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