a teacher may be determined by my contributions to and toward a commu-

James Andrews

nity of learners.

Engaging Influences

English Education and I share a common history. When the first issue of English Education was published in the fall of 1969, I was beginning my first year of college as an English and education major. This anniversary issue marks my first year as a doctoral student in English education as well as my first year teaching in an English education program. After 22 years of teaching at the middle, high school, and college level, I feel excited and gratified to be involved in the study and the work of the teaching of teachers. In my work this year, I've been interested in what teachers observe are the most powerful shaping influences in their development as teachers and learners. I recently read an essay about five veteran English teachers who were reflecting on their careers and what had informed their growth. They mentioned colleagues, texts, and experiences in their classrooms as strong influences, but what was conspicuously absent was any mention of their college preparation courses or of their instructors in these programs.

For those of us who work and study in English education programs, this is what disquieting thought. I tried to remember my own undergraduate preparation in education and realized that I could not remember a single concept from my methods, foundations, philosophy or psychology courses, much about the content of those courses. Was it just that too much time had passed?

My own reflection told me no, as many of my professors from those same years remain vivid memories for me. I can still see my Shakespeare teacher laughing in front of the room, helping us to experience the joy of reading the plays; I can still hear the rich voice of my Romantic literature teacher reading the works of Wordsworth and Keats; and I can still see my history professor standing up and down the aisles talking passionately of WWII. How is it, then, that none of my education professors nor what they had to share became part of my collective memory and knowledge that has shaped my own English teaching all these years?

One answer I can propose is that I am a product of the kind of program Ben Nelms speaks of in this issue, an undergraduate program that was an English studies program, with just the required number of education courses to meet the state certification requirements and one semester of student teaching in the senior year. Working now in a masters program where instructors work closely with students in methods classes (the teaching of reading, the teaching of writing, and English methods), and supervise the two-semester student teaching experience, I cannot imagine that these students will get their professors nor fail to mention them as shaping influences in their impression of themselves as teachers. If this is not so, it certainly raises the question of the importance of what we do and/or how we do it.

Democracy and English Education

Gordon M. Pradl

After helping to edit thirty issues of English Education, I found myself caught, more intensely than ever, between the reality of power and the aspirations of dialogue. Desiring a less hierarchical order in the world of education, I wished my influence as an editor might begin with the lives of teachers and learners: with their stories, their hopes and struggles, their contradictions and dilemmas, their relationships and conversations. I quickly discovered, however, that far too many teachers and learners exist already trapped in conditions that seek to control their lives through external management rather than transform them through collaborative partnership. Mere persuasion and reasoned humane thinking seldom alter such conditions. If life in school is to change, existing structures of status and power inevitably require rethinking. Yet given the strictures many teachers face—and how primary responsibility for decisions about curriculum and instruction has often been withheld from them—it was difficult to find editorial strategies that encouraged teacher's original voices to reappear. Seemingly trapped within “the system,” teachers and learners often lose confidence in their abilities to be active agents; consequently, many remain silent, outside of the caring and sustenance of educational conversation.

There are, of course, many conflicting reasons for the narrowness of our public dialogue, at least as it exists in journals such as English Education. For instance, there is simply the matter of our limited audience and our limited space. We would like to make a difference by reaching everyone concerned with language arts teacher education, broadly conceived, but the reality is that many are otherwise engaged and so are committing their time and energies to different enterprises. It would be admirable to give everyone a chance to be heard; yet, for the approximately 120 articles that we actually published from 1986 to 1993, more than 275 didn’t

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make it to our wider audience. One would hope that quality and representativity would make up for the fact that not everyone’s words break out into the official arena, but that is scant consolation to the aspiring teacher/writer who receives a rejection letter.

There might, however, be another reason for the limited scope of our journal’s dialogue: to what extent are those of us who are in positions of influence and power in education more comfortable with a discourse of certainty than with a discourse of possibility? Driving ourselves forward on the steamroller of progress, adding to our curriculum vitae, it is not easy to step back and remain tentative and reflective. Speculation and humility are not virtues easily traded for advancement. In sending a message that only those texts that sound authoritative will be attended to, journal editors greatly restrict the range of voices that will risk coming forward to be heard. Indeed, it appears to be a contradiction in terms for persons in authority to admit that they have no idea what’s going on, but that they’d be interested in talking it over.

Too often we project a false air of self-assurance when questions arise about matters we are ignorant of or about which deep down we feel a fundamental insecurity. In education, the discourse of certainty can greatly inflate our position as it deludes us into believing that we actually have a grip on what mostly turn out to be very fragile and volatile teaching and learning situations. Talking with certainty blinds us to how our current ideas, which we might still see as tentative, are often presented in language that excludes the uninitiated rather than inviting them to join us in thinking it over. As educational leaders we can sound more theological than genuinely skeptical. We assert, rather than inquire. In this sense those in lower status positions often perceive our academic discussions as displays of power, not occasions for dialogue, and thus we lose a chance to foster some common enterprise, as they dismiss us in silence. Accordingly, we give the lie to our own pleas for wider access to the social conversation that democracy supposedly promotes. Contempt, simultaneously aimed in both directions, is the primary emotion that keeps hierarchies firmly cemented in place.

But this is only to see academic writing from one angle. Many who are successful at publishing their views in conventional formats, but who advocate progressive practices from “active learning” to “language across the curriculum,” continue to remain frustrated at how little their words matter when it comes to affecting what goes on in the majority of classrooms. Meanwhile, schools and teachers serve as a convenient scapegoat in our culture for a range of social ills that are clearly not of their making. From the changing demographics of the family to the frightening growth in disparity between rich and poor, education is inevitably caught in the middle—even while its ability to provide adequately for the broad middle class steadily erodes. (Yes, class—and its economic realities—not just gender or race or ethnicity, has too long remained an invisible category in our discussions, as though to speak of it aloud would render America asunder, but whose America?) Unfortunately, schools and teachers alone do not have the power to create meaningful work for the graduates they turn out yearly. Only the complaining and finger-pointing private sector has that power; yet, currently, this sector seems content to focus on paper profits and luxury items, even as they downsize our opportunities and expectations and try to erode our belief that government and other public institutions need to be active and vigorous defenders of all citizens—not just those with money and status. Ignored is the real source of our people’s collective strength and promise: their ongoing struggle to enact democratic values and so ensure some measure of equity and justice for all.

I wonder, however, if the dream of democracy might stand some serious rethinking. The concept now seems, by default, to focus almost exclusively on competitive political structures—modes of adversarial campaigning, electing, and governing. This makes it difficult to keep alive any notion of democracy as a fundamental process of how citizens might relate to each other in public settings, of how they might work on their problems through open respect and negotiation, not through clandestine crusades of self-interest and misinformation. When the chase after power and status predominate, citizens risk losing any sense of the mutuality of their common interests—that there are limits to everyone having it all. Too much is turned inward to selfish desires, as an individual’s progress proceeds at the expense of others. It seems important to reexamine our cultural priorities: How might we resist the quick fix mentality, and assert the values of tolerance over the hollow persuasions of public relations?

Questing for certainty in our lives, even as certainty seems to drift further from us, makes us more harsh and strident, less tolerant and forgiving. Often it seems we’ve traded our communal sense for a motley aggregate of individual paranoias. Competing for supposedly scarce resources and uncritically valorizing individualism have led too many in our society to squander educational opportunities. It’s been easier to pander to the interests of the latest, self-aggrandizing, victim group than to work hard at negotiating the differences embedded within our common causes. Surrounded by this swirl of negativity, this cacophony of dogmatic voices, where—as learners, as teachers, as editors—do we take hold? Clearly, our range of influence will often be limited. To dare to be different will irritate and threaten existing cozy educational arrangements; but there are ways of working differently among ourselves and with those we are responsible for, ways which encourage deep listening and the importance of reciprocally recognizing everyone’s contribution. If one key aspect of our edu-
The goal of the brain” movement, for instance, succeeds in part because it posits that everyone has the capacity to draw. No one is excluded—a person just needs to draw what she sees, not what the categories in her head are suggesting that she see. How liberating not always to have a preconceived notion of what is in front of you. In this sense, education and learning are not just a matter of career or financial success but more centrally a matter of personal achievement and contentment, the kinds of satisfactions that especially might be realized in the arts and the humanities.

One area that never ceases to amaze me is what often happens as a result of literature instruction. We seem unnecessarily torn between just encouraging readers to find pleasure in reading and developing readers who operate according to rigidly defined “standards” of accuracy and criticism. Opting for the latter route, we rehearse all sorts of routines of “excellence” and perfection, seeking out every symbol and theme—but mostly the result seems to be an ill-at-ease reading public, one which somehow has learned that real literature is only for the special high-brow few. Just in terms of profits one might think that the book publishers would wise up and expose English teaching practices that turn off students to reading. Initiating democratic reading relationships might help reverse some of the trend toward ill-conceived testing and measurement in literature instruction. Supporting teachers who are willing to make their own readings vulnerable—and not use their interpretations to silence those of their students—could help establish communities of readers in dialogue, not competition, with each other.

How might we work to alter conditions in our profession that currently render us powerless to stay in dialogue with each other? I'd like to imagine our desire to change the environments across which we work as an ecological project of democratic renewal. Each new generation is filled with at least two aspirations: one includes an endless search for novelty or for the latest technology or technique; another involves a quest for social and political sensibility. From this sort of self-defeating psychological process in motion is to attack a person's confidence, which in many ways may be pretty fragile to begin with. Given the right nurturing, however, it's clear that most people might succeed to heights previously not imagined. The “drawing on the right side
Research, have consistently produced results commensurate with their status and privilege.

Once we recognize the constructed nature of human social knowledge, we see how imbedded are belief and opinion in maintaining the routines of our institutions. The "best" or "obvious" way of doing something—the latest findings of the expert—immediately runs into some conflict with an "interest" created by an already established pattern of behavior. When straightforward economics and the science of "progress" are involved, it is comparatively easy to push aside buggy whips or manual typewriters: but, when human relationships are what's at issue, then a million excuses arise for clinging to the security of our unexamined common sense. It is for this reason that as editor I scribbled on many rejected manuscripts that related some "successful" practice: "That's terrific what you're now doing, but can you capture the story of what you had to go through in order to transform this aspect of your teaching? What was the personal and/or professional set of relationships that allowed you to grow in this way?" Finding it so difficult to change myself, I want to know what the secret is. Perhaps by building a much larger library of transformation stories, we might inch forward together, supporting each other as we risk behavioral scripts of reciprocity and vulnerability not previously imagined.

For a long time now I believe we have known two simple truths: first, when the learners' intentions are actively engaged and reflected upon, they seem for the most part propelled to succeed in their learning: but, second, the first truth has crucial philosophical, psychological, and political ramifications and therefore can never be merely instrumentally imposed on any system from the outside. Unfortunately, these truths combined drive us to distraction. As teacher educators, we would just like to get on with the first agenda in all its various and rich forms. We want to update and change schools so that teachers and students together share more responsibility for creating the curriculum and the climate for learning. We want more attention paid to the processes of inquiry and imagination, not just their products, and so we would want to reverse many educational routines, such as standardized testing, that separate learners from their own social purposes. However, we also know that often an entire system of human relationships might need reorganizing in a school if we are to bring about a significant shift in how teaching and learning occur there. Aware of this problem, might we finally disrupt our fascination with novelty, with the belief that there is some new and magical approach or instrument coming from the outside that will solve our "problems" in education? How, I wonder, might we work to help others to see that educational "problems" are only solved when people reinvent those authority relationships within the schools that have previously blocked them from sharing in the responsibility for teaching and learning?

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