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ABSTRACT

As the secondary school English elective curriculum developed in the 1960s and 1970s, it adhered to four major philosophical beliefs: the importance of student and teacher interest, the necessity for change and variety, the rejection of the core curriculum, and a dedication to relevance. These tenets determined the following characteristics relating to the curriculum's content or structure: (1) student choice, a characteristic indigenous to all elective programs; (2) teacher creation of courses; (3) nongrading; (4) phasing to indicate level of difficulty; (5) longevity of courses; (6) literature emphasis; (7) short elective courses; (8) variety of teachers and students; (9) college model; (10) varied materials; (11) no sequencing; (12) no curricular requirements; and (13) innovative courses. (AEA)

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Philosophy and Characteristics of the Secondary English  
Elective Curriculum

"Elective English programs...provide a different but stronger  
and more logical focus [than traditional programs]. While,  
in effect, rejecting attempts to structure all English, they  
divide the subject into meaningful units, each one of which has  
its own structure."

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The High School Journal, November, 1972

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## Philosophy and Characteristics of the Secondary English

### Elective Curriculum

The philosophy of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum can be divided into four major tenets, tenets which this paper contends determine the thirteen central characteristics of the curriculum as it developed in the 1960's and 1970's in the nation's high schools.\* While as critics indicated, many Secondary English Elective Curriculum developers were remiss in articulating any philosophy, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum's practitioners were remarkable in their general adherence to the four basic tenets outlined in this paper. Again, these tenets determined the general characteristics of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum and guided program developers--albeit occasionally unconsciously--in their work. Please see page two.

### Philosophy of Interest

The first and most important of the curriculum's philosophical bases was that of interest. Faced with apathetic students--and often teachers--in traditional English programs and courses, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was committed to the

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\*Note: The only characteristic which is indigenous to all elective programs is the factor of student choice. In most, but not all elective programs, phasing and nongrading are also characteristics. The other ten characteristics vary with specific elective curricula although generally applicable to the admittedly dizzying array of elective programs.

## Summary Chart of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum

## Philosophy and Resulting Characteristics

## PHILOSOPHY

## A. Philosophy of Interest

1. Students, with some restrictions in some programs, were free to choose English courses.
2. Teachers, with some restrictions in some programs, created their own courses.
3. Elective courses were non-graded, usually within two grades, sometimes within more.
4. Elective courses were occasionally phased to indicate level of difficulty.
5. Student election and teacher creation determined courses offered and longevity of courses.

## B. Philosophy of Change and Variety

1. Elective courses were short or shorter than traditional program courses, ranging from one semester to a period of a few weeks.
2. Students experienced a variety of teachers, and teachers experienced different groups of students in elective courses.

## C. Philosophy of Rejecting the Core Curriculum

1. Elective courses were not necessarily sequenced by content or level.

## D. Philosophy of Relevance

(see A., Philosophy of Interest, structural characteristic number one)

6. Elective courses were predominantly literature-oriented

3. Many elective curricula used a college model for courses and programs.

2. Elective courses were rarely required.

1. Elective courses in innovative areas, such as film and media, were offered.

RESULTING STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

RESULTING CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS

ideal that if one were interested in a course of studies or instruction (reminiscent of Charles W. Eliot of Harvard), then learning and teaching would be markedly improved. The traditional English curriculum's contention that interest should naturally occur because the subject itself was self-evidently important was rejected. Also rejected was the optimistic belief that a truly good teacher would automatically make any aspect of the curriculum—however unpalatable—interesting. Interest, it was felt, could not be assumed or artificially manufactured: it must be aroused initially.

#### Student Choice

One way to create interest was to provide choice. When a student or teacher was allowed to determine what he or she would learn or teach, then there was a better chance that the person would have a more immediate stake in the instructional process and an established enthusiasm for the subject. With choice, the major characteristic of any elective curriculum, interest was a more attainable goal. Thus, from the philosophy of interest as a basic and vital curriculum goal, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum emerged with student choice as regards English courses and teacher autonomy as regards course creation and course content. While total choice in the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was an illusion—student choice could be restricted by age, the completion of required courses,

of the passing of a basic skills course in some programs, and teachers could be pressed into service to create courses in various areas—the limited choice provided teachers and students in the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was wider than that offered by the traditional curriculum.

The concept of student choice was a central one in the elective curriculum and, essentially, distinguished it from other curricular forms. One could posit that, because in the 1960's schools were accused of being training grounds for oppression, where hapless, helpless students were told what to do and what to study, the elective curriculum was almost a political matter. In The Limits of Educational Reform, Martin Carnoy explained the relation of curricular choice and societal status:

[In inner city schools] decisions about each child's studies are made impersonally by counselors with little input from the student; and alternatives are few anyway in such schools...in other schools decisions about a youngster's program of studies are based upon discussions between counselor and pupil in order to select from among the large number of available course offerings... in a sense such youngsters are being socialized to be the "bosses," while the ones who are in the inner-city school are being prepared to be the workers or the unemployed. The former will learn to give the orders and the latter to follow them.

Electives seemed more democratic in that they gave students, all students, a choice about their studies. It was a choice which seemed to underscore a concept of fairness and a choice which would provide students a greater interest in the English curriculum.

As Edmund Farrell explained:

Students demand the right to select their own courses on every level and with a kind of democratic belligerence inquire: "who are you to tell me, a grown person of 16 or 18 years of age, what my educational needs are?"<sup>2</sup>

#### Teacher Creation of Courses

Along with student choice, one of the most significant factors in the Secondary English Elective Curriculum's widespread adoption was its recognition of the interest of the English teacher in what he or she would teach. While, ten or so years before, theorists had told teachers what to teach and had even recommended the establishment of "teacher-proof" packets, the English teachers in an elective program had greater control over what they could teach. It was heady freedom, as cited by Adele H. Stern:

[Teachers] were declaring: We want to determine what we teach. We don't want the publishers tell us. We don't want mandated curriculum from the central office. We want to write and develop our own courses which will meet the needs and interests of our students, which will help them in their day-to-day activities now and will build interests and ideas for the rest of their lives.<sup>3</sup>

In the elective curriculum, teachers had the freedom to determine what they would teach; and, if one looks at the above quotation carefully, it was obvious that what the teacher wanted was curiously akin to the ideals of the Progressive Movement. Not only was the student demanding choice; teachers wanted it, too.

#### Nongrading

A third characteristic to emerge from the philosophy of interest

was the concept of nongrading within a curriculum. Because a student was interested in a course and chose it, rigid age distinctions which had previously governed the composition of English courses seemed far less important than they once had: Secondary English Elective Curriculum proponents felt that students separated by a few years in age could mix freely and successfully in a single class because the distinctions between intellectual maturity were far less important than the motivating factor of interest.

#### Phasing

Yet, as a fourth characteristic, some curricular proponents were unsure of the effects of completely nongraded courses whose difficulty level might frustrate an otherwise interested student, provided phasing, a numerical designation given each elective course to indicate subject difficulty. While a particularly phased course could have students of different ages within it, the phasing provided students an index of course level.

#### Longevity of Courses

A fifth characteristic which stemmed from the philosophy of interest was the possibility of allowing students and teachers to determine not only the courses offered but the longevity of the offered courses. If there was no interest in a specific subject area of the discipline--evidenced by teacher failure to create a course or student failure to subscribe to an offered

course--then that subject area would be eliminated or dropped from the curriculum. Because interest was the overriding concern, artificial creation or maintenance of a specific course was considered untenable.

#### Literature Emphasis

A sixth characteristic of the interest philosophy was the literary dominance of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum, reflecting the interest of the teacher-creators and also, to a lesser extent, of the students. Teachers, trained as English majors in literature-dominated college curricula and students, electing literature courses more frequently (whatever the complicated reasons) than other courses, made literature the backbone of most elective programs.

#### Philosophy of Change and Variety

A second philosophical concern of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was the importance of change and variety within the curriculum. Concerned that in the traditional program students and one teacher spent an entire year together with a small pool of texts from which to work, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum encouraged students and teachers to experience more varied subject matter, groupings, and materials.

#### Short Elective Courses

Thus one characteristic of the curriculum to emerge from

the philosophy of change and variety was the offering of short or shorter courses than traditional programs. These short courses ranged from one semester to a period of a few weeks. This length of time allowed students to change teachers and teachers to change classes of students.

#### Variety of Teachers and Students.

The above gave rise to a second characteristic, the students' experience of a variety of teachers and the teachers' experience of different groups of students in the elective curriculum.

#### College Model

As a third characteristic to emerge from the philosophy of change and variety, most Secondary English Elective Curricula used a college model, creating a curriculum which offered short, essentially unrelated, unsequenced English courses taught by a variety of instructors.

#### Varied Materials

A fourth characteristic of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was that it veered away from the dominance of anthologies and hard-bound texts and used a stunning array of paperbacks and other materials to provide curricular variety and to enrich subject matter.

#### Philosophy Rejecting the Core Curriculum

As G. Robert Carlsen and others have indicated, a third philosophical

concern of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was the rejection of the core curriculum. Proponents of elective programs did not maintain that certain pieces of literature or exposure to certain skills was essential to the English education of all secondary students and also that a specific sequencing of literature--or of any series of skills--was essential.

### No Sequencing

As a result, one characteristic of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was the failure to sequence courses or levels of instruction as had the traditional curriculum. As with the characteristic of the college model, one could not dictate that a student should experience X before Y or vice versa.

### No Curricular Requirements

In some cases, this philosophy dictated the second characteristic stemming from the rejection of the core curriculum, the absence of curricular requirements. Because there was no core curriculum, one could not state with authority that every student should have a specific course or group of courses within his or her secondary experience. Imbedded in these two characteristics, the failure to sequence and the failure to require, was the concept that skills in the areas of language, writing, and literature were contained in almost all forms of the English curriculum and were not necessarily transmitted in any specific course. While some might assume this belief in the inclusiveness of English to be

an inherently optimistic point of view, it was another cogent rationale for the rejection of the core curriculum: not only were there no sacred works or sequence of study, English itself as a subject was so interrelated that most of the skills and essential concepts were embedded in almost all areas of study.

### Philosophy of Relevance

#### Innovative Courses

A fourth philosophical tenet of the Secondary English Elective Curriculum was a dedication to relevance. Feeling that many traditional curricula, especially in a devotion to the "classics," ignored current literature and areas of study, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum included innovative courses such as film and media and also encouraged the reading of very contemporary literature. In addition, some elective programs included new forms of language study. Faced with students who could see no connection between the traditional English course and their exploding world, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum attempted to provide as many au courant offerings as possible. Perhaps their very belief that English was relevant, was related to the real world as even students might define it, allowed elective creators, with some confidence, to abandon Silas Marner and Shakespeare for Marshall McLuhan and film-making.

Summary

Thus despite its occasional failure in articulation, the Secondary English Elective Curriculum adhered to four major philosophical beliefs: the importance of interest, the necessity for change and variety, the rejection of the core curriculum, and a dedication to relevance. From these four philosophical tenets sprang thirteen characteristics, one of which, student choice, was indigenous to all elective programs; two of which, nongrading and phasing, were common in most elective programs; and ten of which were found in a variety of elective curricula. The characteristics related logically to either the curriculum's content or structure.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Martin Carnoy and Henry M. Levin, The Limits of Educational Reform (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 231-32.
- 2 Edmund Farrell, "English from Apex to Nadir: A Non-Elected, Omniphased, Opinionated, Untested Oral Examination of What's Up--and Down," The English Record, October 1972, p. 12.
- 3 Adele H. Stern, "Elective English--A New Look," paper delivered at the 1973 meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, p. 3.