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ABSTRACT

Frank Aydelotte is best remembered for developing in the 1930s and 1940s the nation's most innovative and influential honors program, based on the education he received as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. As coordinator of freshman English at Indiana University, Aydelotte attacked the dominant Harvard model of instruction while promoting a method emphasizing the importance of teaching students to think critically about issues, thereby becoming a chief spokesperson for the thought movement in America. Aydelotte, at Oxford beginning in 1903, experienced a method of study very different from what he had known at Harvard. At Oxford, a strong grounding in the important thought of western culture strengthened students' minds and because they wrote regularly about what they read, it also helped them to become strong writers. Aydelotte argued that writing cannot be taught alone, but only in conjunction with reading and thinking. Upon returning to Indiana University, Aydelotte developed an approach to writing instruction that emphasized wide reading, deep thought, and hard work. This new approach had considerable influence among educators. Aydelotte's revolution proved, however, to be short-lived. In addition to the problems identified by his contemporaries, the thought course rejected almost all explicit instruction in rhetoric by privileging content over form, and thus did not provide the tools for teaching average students to write. (Eighteen references are appended.) (HB)

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Frank Aydelotte, Oxford University, and the Thought  
Movement in America

Frank Aydelotte is best remembered as the progressive president of Swarthmore College who developed in the 1930s and 40s the nation's most innovative and influential honors program based on a modified version of the education he himself received as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in England. Instead of taking discrete courses, exceptional students studied two broad disciplines--history and English literature, for instance--in small seminars under the guidance of a tutor to prepare for a series of broad examinations at the end of their college careers. Such a program, Aydelotte argued, freed exceptional students from the daily grind of lectures, quizzes, and final examinations that ate up their time and prevented them from working on major individual projects. While Aydelotte's contributions as an administrator are well known, it is not well known that he began his educational experimentation in this country as the coordinator of freshman English at the Indiana University after returning from Oxford. During the second decade of this century, he wrote and edited a series of articles and books about teaching freshman English that attacked the dominant Harvard model of instruction and that advocated the

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use of a modified Oxford method to teach freshman writing. This method emphasized the importance of teaching students to think critically about important issues, and Aydelotte became the one of the chief spokespersons for the thought movement in English departments during the early decades of this century.

#### AYDELOTTE AT HARVARD

Although Aydelotte completed his BA at Indiana University in 1900, he began his serious study of English at Harvard, where he matriculated in 1903 and took his MA in 1904. While studying there, he became exposed to the assumptions about writing instruction that had, by the earliest years of this century, become deeply rooted in many colleges and universities in America. The course, widely known as English A, developed at Harvard under a number of influences, most notably those of President Charles W. Eliot, who established Harvard's elective system and who advocated the new scientific method of education in America. Under his leadership, Adams Sherman Hill, who was a professional journalist before turning to teaching at Harvard, argued that the most important English course that all students should take should be "the art of composition . . . rather than one in philology, or in literary history, or even in literature" ("English" 509). To further this goal, he wrote his influential textbook, The Principles of Rhetoric, that formed the basis of English A. The first part of the book covered correctness; the second, the forms or modes of discourse. By

the time Aydelotte reached Harvard in 1903, Barrett Wendell was a dominant figure in the English department. He had written English Composition, which helped popularize the terms unity, coherence, and mass (which was similar to emphasis) that remain standard in current-traditional rhetoric. Harvard's students wrote a short theme a day on personal subjects and longer themes throughout the semester and learned to write correctly and to follow the formal patterns of narration, description, and exposition (see Wozniak 125-27; Berlin 37-38). Most importantly, English A excluded extensive reading, emphasizing only short passages for student imitation. By the time Aydelotte left Harvard in 1904 with his MA, he knew the program there well because he not only took English A, but he also later taught it. He first became the assistant to Professor C. T. Copeland to help read student themes and hold student conferences. Later he was given complete responsibility for a section of English A (Blanshard 43).

#### AYDELOTTE AT OXFORD

Aydelotte's attacks on English A resulted directly from his years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, a position he assumed in 1904. At Oxford, he experienced a method of instruction very different from the system he had experienced at Harvard. Instead of taking a required number of courses, he worked with a tutor who planned his reading list and program of study. Instead of majoring in a single subject, he read deeply in two areas, English literature and history.

Instead of taking tests for every class, he prepared for examinations at the end of his studies. Instead of studying writing in a separate composition class, he wrote papers regularly for his tutor and for seminar leaders, who critiqued his work not only for its expression but also for its thought. While at Oxford, he worked with Professor Walter Raleigh, an expert in the Elizabethan period. The seminar paper he wrote for Raleigh eventually became his B.Litt. thesis and was published by the Clarendon Press at Oxford as Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds in 1913.

Upon returning to Indiana University, Aydelotte published an essay entitled "English as Humane Letters" that outlined what he found valuable about an Oxford education. Until recently, he argued, Oxford had been based on an in-depth study of ancient literature and culture in a program called Literae Humaniores, informally known as The Greats. Students read in two parts of the subject, one being the study of the principal Greek and Roman poets, orators, and dramatists, the other more important part being the study of classical historians and philosophers, a study that included reading some modern philosophy. After digesting this material, students, Aydelotte argued, were well grounded in the most important thought of western culture. This grounding strengthened their minds and, because they wrote regularly about what they read, it also made them strong writers. Although Aydelotte did not argue for a return to

the classics (he, like many Americans, lacked adequate preparation in Greek and Latin), he found his education at Oxford more stimulating than that he had received at Indiana and Harvard. He also thought that he learned more about writing in Raleigh's seminar than he had learned in Harvard's English A.

#### DEVELOPING THE THOUGHT COURSE AT INDIANA

What Aydelotte learned at Oxford convinced him that composition could not be taught alone but should be taught in conjunction with reading, thinking, and social criticism (Moran, "Frank Aydelotte"). Upon returning to Indiana University as an Associate Professor of English and as the coordinator of freshman English, he wrote a series of books advocating a method of writing instruction based on his Oxford experiences: College English (1913), Materials for the Study of English Literature and Composition (1914), and The Oxford Stamp, and Other Essays (1917), which collected essays he published about his Oxford experiences. The approach Aydelotte developed presented one of the few alternatives to the Harvard method because it rooted writing instruction in the search for significance through wide reading and classroom dialectic.

Aydelotte's attack on English A generally resulted from his new conviction that writing must be taught as a form of thinking and that the best way to teach thought was to require students to read and discuss that reading. His specific criticisms of English A were that it emphasized

superficial form and correctness over substance and thought. In his essay "The History of English as a College Subject," for instance, he attempted to identify the Harvard method with the English rhetorical tradition growing out of Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric (1783) and George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776). Aydelotte argued that both books, as well as many books in this tradition, emphasized form over substance and established artificial standards of correctness. Blair and Campbell, for instance, both critique the writing of admitted masters of English prose to identify stylistic improprieties and to establish standards of usage and style. Aydelotte, on the other hand, assumed a more modern stance--that usage is established not by handbooks and textbooks but by the practice of actual writers. It follows that the way to master usage is to read extensively, not to memorize the artificial rules of handbooks and rhetorics.

Aydelotte also attacked the Harvard method for its emphasis on form. In his essay "Robert Louis Stevenson[:] Darkening Counsel," Aydelotte questioned one of Harvard's central methods of teaching writing, imitation. Stevenson had written that he himself learned to write by playing the "sedulous ape." By this he meant that, upon finding a pleasing passage, he would imitate it until he managed to capture its effect in his own writing. This story became so often repeated at Harvard, Aydelotte claimed, that whenever students heard Stevenson's name in English class they would stamp their feet "as at the mention of the ladies or of Yale"

("Stevenson" 152). Aydelotte rejected Stevenson's method because he rejected the story, claiming that Stevenson developed his style not from imitation but from wide reading, deep thought, and hard work. Students learn to write only through these means, Aydelotte argued, not through imitating form and style apart from content.

Aydelotte's assumptions about teaching writing grew to be different from those of his Harvard professors. While they assumed that students needed instruction primarily in formal principles, Aydelotte argued that form grew out of content. In his essay "English as Training in Thought," for instance, he criticized the Harvard method as an attempt "to give practice in writing to students who have nothing to say, which means that neither teacher nor pupil understands what he is about" (374). Thought comes first, he argued. If students have something to say, they will then want to write well and will teach themselves how to say it.

Upon assuming his duties as coordinator of freshman English at Indiana, Aydelotte began developing a program based on his Oxford experiences and the pedagogical principles he learned as a Rhodes Scholar. During the first quarter of this program, students read about substantive political, educational, and social issues and then wrote essays about them. For instance, they read most of Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, much of John Ruskin's political tract Unto This Last, and selections about education from Cardinal Newman's The Idea of the University and Thomas

Huxley's Science and Education, all of which Aydelotte collected in his edited volume, Materials for the Study of English Literature and Composition. Students spent most of their class time debating the issues raised in the reading. The teacher, Aydelotte explained in the "Introduction" to English and Engineering, functioned as a midwife in the Platonic sense to draw forth different ideas and opinions by asking questions and clarifying issues (xx). Little overt writing instruction went on in class. That took place in conferences and through comments on papers. After taking this first course, students then went on to take a second course that used poetry as its basis for discussion and writing (see Aydelotte's College English for a full discussion of his program).

#### AYDELOTTE'S INFLUENCE

How successful was Aydelotte in convincing American English teachers of the usefulness of the idea or thought course? The results were mixed on the freshman level. At Indiana, Aydelotte apparently suffered a palace revolt, for while he was away on leave to Oxford in 1912 to complete the final year of his Rhodes Scholarship, the English department stripped his courses of freshman English credit. To diminish his influence on the freshman program when he returned from England, the department limited Aydelotte's teaching to upper division courses during his last two years there, and the department returned to a course modeled on English A. However, on the national scene, Aydelotte gained some

influence. As Professor Norman Foerster of the University of Wisconsin wrote in 1912, Aydelotte's method was being used at that university. Foerster also noted that Professor H. R. Steeves of Columbia had co-edited a volume of substantial essays entitled Representative Essays in Modern Thought. Foerster concluded that "various things point to the fact that throughout the country substance is to be stressed, rather than 'artistic' fluency or accuracy of detail" (qtd. in Blanshard 111). Aydelotte had his greatest national influence on freshman anthologies, many of which embraced the thought approach. Foerster, along with Frederick A. Manchester and Karl Young, published Essays for College Men (1913), and one of Aydelotte's Indiana colleagues, Richard Rice, Jr., who moved to Smith College, published in 1915 College and the Future, an anthology of freshman readings based on Aydelotte's methods. Other anthologies appeared, including Maurice Garland Fulton's College Life, Its Conditions and Problems (1914) and Bowman, Bredvold, Greenfield, and Weirick's Essays for College English (1915) (see Hardegree 82-101 for a full discussion of Aydelotte's influence). While rejected at Indiana, Aydelotte's thought course attracted the attention of administrators at MIT, and this school offered Aydelotte a position in 1915, which he gladly accepted after his two final, unhappy years in Bloomington. While teaching there, he edited English and Engineering, a book of readings that applied his pedagogical method to teaching students in technical fields to write

(Moran, "Road").

#### CRITICS OF THE THOUGHT COURSE

Aydelotte thus found himself at the forefront of a pedagogical revolution, but, like most revolutions, this one had its critics. Two scholars attacked Aydelotte's work on the grounds that the thought course ignored concerns of essay form, that it ignored the importance of student experience, and that it was too hard to teach to freshmen. The first criticism responded to Aydelotte's 1910 essay in The Nation in which he attacked the then popular form-oriented methods of teaching freshman English and argued that these approaches should be replaced by courses requiring students, before writing, to read pieces of literature, including essays, for the ideas contained in them. Such "writing [Aydelotte maintained] is to be training in thinking, which alone will make it worth while" ("Course" 520). This essay elicited a response from Ada L. F. Snell of Mt. Holyoke College. Snell argued that an emphasis on ideas alone would not teach students to write because "the study of form cannot be separated from the study of ideas" (9). Students must study form to give their ideas "a vital organization . . . a purpose . . . proportion . . . progression" (9). "In short [Snell argues], the student should in the freshman year develop a clear idea of form, and should practice shaping his ideas, until form becomes a ready servant to his will as are his feet and hands." (9) Snell therefore rejects Aydelotte's privileging of idea or content over form. In order to

express ideas, the student writer must first have a sense of form; and this same sense of form prepares students to follow the ideas of writers being read. She concludes that "A knowledge of Form then, is not to be regarded as something which interferes with the understanding of ideas, but as something without which ideas cannot be caught" (9).

The second criticism appears in Joseph M. Thomas's 1916 "Do Thought-Courses Produce Thinking," which criticizes not just Aydelotte's work but the entire thought approach and the textbooks it had spawned. Thomas's attack was three-pronged. First, he argued that the thought course, with its emphasis on abstract ideas, removes students from their direct experience. This removal is problematic because, Thomas argued,

What they need is stimulation to observe more closely and more accurately than they are accustomed to do, to reflect on the particular problems of conduct which confront them, and to try to reach intelligent conclusions concerning them instead of following blindly the conventions of the crowd. It is in this manner that they will arrive at a sound philosophy of free-will or the nature of God. (82)

Emphasizing abstraction first will cause students to avoid experiencing life itself, and this lack of experience will cause them to write badly rather than well. Thomas's second objection was that the thought approach demands too much of freshman who lack the intellectual development to understand

complex ideas. His objection to the approach was therefore largely curricular: it is foolish to require students to read essays in various disciplines before possessing broad knowledge in them. If the thought course were adopted, he concluded, it would best find its place not in the freshman but in the senior year, after students had read widely in various subjects. As a capstone to a liberal arts education, the thought course would effectively encourage students to think meaningfully about significant issues.

Thomas's third objection concerned the preparation of the teaching staff, which he thought was poorly trained to teach cross-disciplinary thought. As Thomas condescendingly stated, he could "see no reason for expecting Freshmen to think fruitfully about these questions when there is so little evidence that their instructors ever have done so" (83). For the thought course to work, it would have to be taught not by the young beginning instructor but by a teacher with an unusually wide range of interests and experiences. This criticism took place within the context of a profession that had begun to view itself as primarily qualified to teach literature, not discourse in general; it also took place within a discipline that was beginning to view composition instruction as the responsibility of the beginning not the experienced instructor.

#### CONCLUSION

Aydelotte's revolution therefore proved to be a short-lived one. In addition to the problems that his contemporary

critics identified, the thought course rejected almost all explicit instruction in rhetoric. What rhetorical instruction that existed entered the class through conferences and comments on papers. Such an approach must have been back breaking for the teacher, and it certainly assumed that most students could write fairly well, a questionable assumption given the complaints we hear from English teachers of the day about their students' weak writing skills. Because of his rejection of rhetoric and technique, he did not give teachers tools to teach average students to write. This limitation is probably why Aydelotte's lasting influence has been on the development of American honors programs. Students who can write fairly well can develop as writers in the idea course; those who have basic problems need help, help with which Aydelotte was not readily forthcoming.

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