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WHAT WE SHOULD TEACH.
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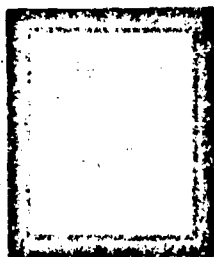
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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INDICATES THAT MANY TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHAT OUGHT TO BE INCLUDED IN ENGLISH SYLLABI AND HOW ENGLISH SHOULD BE TAUGHT ARE INVALID. BUT MOST EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OF TODAY IS INTUITIVE AND UNSCIENTIFIC BECAUSE WE DO NOT HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY TO ANSWER THE BASIC QUESTIONS OF HOW THE BRAIN LEARNS, THINKS, AND REMEMBERS, PARTICULARLY IN REFERENCE TO LANGUAGE AND THE FORMATION OF ATTITUDES. ONLY WHEN THESE QUESTIONS ARE ANSWERED WILL WE BE ABLE TO PRODUCE SYLLABI THAT CAN BE DEFENDED BY FACT UNDER RIGID SCRUTINY. UNTIL THEN AND ESPECIALLY WHEN THAT TIME COMES, TEACHERS THEMSELVES ARE IN THE BEST POSITION TO KNOW THE NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS AND TO DESIGN SYLLABI TO MEET THOSE NEEDS. EVEN NOW, ALL THE ELEMENTS OF THOROUGHLY DESIGNED THOUGH UNSCIENTIFIC COURSES OF STUDY CAN BE STATED IN CLEAR AND PRECISE DETAIL, AND MORE COMMUNICATION OF THIS NATURE SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED BY STATE ASSOCIATIONS, JOURNALS, AND THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH. ALSO NEEDED TODAY IS THE INCLUSION IN ENGLISH COURSES OF MORE LITERATURE OF CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE. IF WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO KNOW THE PROBLEMS THEY WILL HAVE TO SOLVE WHEN THEY LEAVE SCHOOL, WE MUST ENCOURAGE THEM TO READ LITERATURE WHICH FACES THE PRESENT AND FUTURE, AS WELL AS THE MONUMENTAL WORKS WHICH ARE PART OF THE PAST. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA," NO. 5, AUGUST 1967.) (DL)

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WARWICK GOODENOUGH

What We Should Teach

The move to establish a national association for teachers of English was pioneered in South Australia, which had a well-established state association. Warwick Goodenough, who had been a very active member of the South Australian Association for some years, became the first vice-president of the Australian Association. He has taught in Tasmania, and now teaches at St Peter's College in Adelaide.

In this address, he raises questions about teaching English which are typical of the questions which trouble many classroom teachers, but which are clearly not questions which the classroom teacher unaided, can answer. They demand research, time and money.

I do not intend to discuss the relative values of individual texts, courses, or methods of teaching. In any case I am not qualified to do so. What I want to consider is the content, in the widest possible sense, of our meetings with our students. And I use the word 'students' because I find the word 'pupils' quaint, and believe that those we teach in our secondary schools are, increasingly, professional students.

At the outset, there are five assumptions that I want to discuss, which may later be modified or even contradicted. The assumptions are these:

1. That, notwithstanding multi-million dollar research studies like the *American Project English*, or the four-year study at the London School of Linguistics, insufficient work has been done and insufficient agreement has been reached (certainly in Australia) for any individual or organisation to say with authority what must be taught in a course of English.
2. That a teacher who cannot be trained to design a course to suit his students best is not capable of teaching that group at all.
3. That all of the elements of a thoroughly designed course are ultimately capable of being stated, in detail, clearly, precisely and unequivocally.
4. That a list of text books by itself is neither a syllabus nor a curriculum, but simply reflects in our thinking the dead hand, or the

12 / Warwick Goodenough

dead foot, of traditional, conservative university education.

5. That what we teach should be related to the student's needs as we understand them.

In 1965, I undertook to make a very sketchy summary for the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, of research being done in Australia into the teaching of English. And I wrote then that present research in this area was 'haphazard, peripheral and perfunctory'. This was not to minimize the achievements, or denigrate the intentions of people working in the field. Some important beginnings have been made. But you will know that there is a long row to hoe.

Compare our position with that of medical research. You will be aware why medical research made so little progress for more than a century: it worked back to front. It started with the sick patient, the problem in hand, rather than with the living cell, the gene, the virus. It could not of course do otherwise. Medical research had to wait for the research tools of our new technology and then provide a great deal of money, perhaps still inadequate, for basic research.

Research into teaching, especially into the teaching of English, is still largely alchemical, intuitive, non-scientific, mainly because we do not yet have the technology to answer basic questions. Perhaps this is not far off. Recently I heard a soliloquy from *Hamlet* done, with surprising expression, by a computer, which (or who) then played the piano while a second computer sang *Daisy* in a strong baritone. Our gadgetry is improving. But in general we still have to begin with the 'patient', whose spelling, handwriting, grammar or speech is 'sick' and which we want to cure.

Until we understand how, physiologically, the brain learns and thinks and remembers, what the neurological relationship is between spoken and written language, how attitudes are formed and why, and until we can measure and therefore predict with some certainty the effect of individual texts on the individual minds of individual students, we are forced to work by guess or by God, and perhaps neither is a totally acceptable authority on English curricula. So far we have tended to prescribe traditional texts which we suspect may have helped to form the kind of personality which our prejudices lead us to admire. If our ideal is the Oxbridge don, we assume that a diet of *Il Penseroso* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* will produce a similar result. We may be surprised to hear that our ideal don may just as well have gorged on pink gins and the Windmill theatre. We are especially aware of our ignorance if we read a popular book on physiology like W. Grey Walker's *The Living Brain* and do so with the teaching of English in mind. Such a book throws much darkness on theories of education,

but even more on the mediaeval practices of the teacher of English, whose mysterious black art seldom survives the ducking stool of the pragmatist.

Perhaps the day will come when Departments of Education will have a syllabus computer programmed to select 200 suitable texts of minutely graded difficulty for a fourteen-year-old boy with an IQ of 109, a postman father, a Quaker mother, a bullying elder sister, living in a puritanical and vegetarian sub-culture, an uncle in the navy, and the boy keeps parrots and wears 8c shoes. At present the fact that he is fourteen years of age usually determines the course he takes.

With this in mind, I hope that the AATE, with the help of suitably interested organisations, may consider the planning of a seminar to study and disseminate the results of relevant studies overseas, and then initiate and co-operate in studies on a national rather than state basis. English teaching needs professional hairdressers—we cannot manage with home perms any longer.

My second assumption—that a qualified teacher should know best the needs of the students—is a kite worth flying briefly, however easily one may shoot it down. I like to think of myself, professionally, as someone who knows the needs of his students, who is well and widely read in literature and professional pedagogics, who can relate courses to individual needs. I like to think of myself as being more able than the Public Examinations Board to know what is wanted and how to teach it best. I'm not really like this as you will have observed. I just like to think of myself in this way. I'm sure we all often say to ourselves: 'Why can't the English teacher teach them how to think; how to read; how to love life through living and through understanding? Why can't the English teacher be informed, witty, personable, charming, learned, indispensable? Why can't an English teacher—be like me?'

We can only teach what we know. The most high-falutin' syllabus does not make the slightest difference to what we are able to teach our students. The usefulness of English teaching, like that of milking cows or selling cars, depends on the quality of the training acquired, not on the syllabus, the variety of cow, or the make of car.

And there are some ludicrous aspects about syllabuses, especially centralized syllabuses, that you will know about. For example they tend to be prepared by unpaid amateurs, with no facilities for research, and no time to read even one per cent of the material available. In South Australia, the Leaving is still an external examination administered by the University. As a member of the big English sub-committee, I was asked in December to form a little sub-committee to recommend, to the larger sub-committee, a leaving syllabus for 1968. I gathered

14 / *Warwick Goodenough*

three other busy amateurs: a senior master from a high school; a headmistress of a technical school; and a teaching sister from a convent school. We read for two months, met for a total of some five hours and then made our recommendations. In the main much of the syllabus will stand. If you total the salaries, books, classrooms, students' living allowances and scholarships, examinations and so on to which that syllabus commits education and the tax-payer in South Australia, you will discover that it comes to the staggering total, for 1968, of nearly one million dollars.

Now I find this curious. Can you imagine the BHP company or Mr Ansett agreeing to an annual commitment of one million dollars on the say-so of four people after five hours planning, and no facilities for confirming their hunches?

The syllabus itself is also curious. Until 1967, the syllabus was, in effect, a list of books. No aims were stated; no areas for study were described; no aspects of novels, plays, or poetry were shown to merit attention at this level. However, in 1967 a useful statement was included: this I take to be the germ of what is really a syllabus, and not merely a list of books thought to be suitable, or representative of a professor's favorites.

Decisions about the suitability of books are made in a tugging match between the academic university team, who want, on the whole, dilute English II; the employers who want tidy spellers—not too well-educated or thoughtful; the parents, who want to keep their children in their own social and intellectual moulds (and write to the Minister if they think the books are too sexy); the booksellers who want to sell a lot of books; the government which wants to give away as few books as possible; the specialists, like newspaper men, dramaphiles, creative writers and politicians, who are keen to exert an influence if they can; and the teachers who are perverse enough to want to educate their students.

In preparing the syllabus there is a kind of agreed formula:

*Something old, something new,
Something borrowed, but nothing blue.*

By the time we have been careful not to offend the Anglicans, the Catholics, the Methodists, the Seventh Day Adventists, the vegetarians and the nudists, where can we turn? To Shakespeare and Keats, who, if we understand them properly, are offensive to most pressure groups?

The texts depend, at least partly, on the books sent by the publishers. I haven't time, unfortunately, to talk about publishers, especially those who write in February and say:

I am sending you under separate cover, the following 473 books . . .

or who send a copy of:

A new 28-year English course, with Teachers' Handbooks, progress charts, 69 film strips, a set of 200 suitable children's books, a reading lab., four marking pens, a battery-operated computer and Instant Varied Selection Result Sheets.

Most Australian publishers are informed, charming, and helpful, as well as generous. But of course it is all round the wrong way. Instead of taking pot-luck on what is available, teachers should be in a position to say what they want, and in what form it should be printed to be of most use to them. There are signs that this is happening. And we, as associations of teachers of English, need to watch out for attempts to produce a central unvaried syllabus, which depends on price-cutting and contracts, and finally advocates a tiny range of cheap, unreadable editions of unexceptionable books in permanent plastic covers and printed on indestructible paper. This is, of course, an exaggerated view and common sense dictates some common texts, but economies should be based on proved needs, not on economic efficiency only.

The ACER tests, the results of which determine who will receive Commonwealth Scholarships in their senior secondary years, last year illustrated how well-meaning, sophisticate teaching, in fact even demands an unprofessional or immoral approach. In giving students practice in the likely type of paper, one was forced to adopt a line something like this:

You may be asked to select 'correct' versions of sentences which imply a knowledge of traditional English grammar. In such a test the acceptable answers are likely to be based on Latin grammar, based in turn on pre-Christian Greek linguistic description; or on popular grammarians like Nesfield. To secure a scholarship you are advised not to give answers which usage and commonsense might suggest, but answers which are considered 'correct' according to the old 'rules' about prepositions, cases and all that junk. After the test you may return to normal.

In fact such advice brought a handsome profit. (Advance to Monash. As you pass go collect 200.)

The ACER found what was called 'a certain overall problem', namely that students came from six different states, each with its own education system and its own syllabus. If the ACER is 'fundamentally a research organization' one would like to know what fundamental research was done to establish criteria of 'correctness' and 'usage'; why ACER assumptions differed in some particulars from the different syllabuses of the six states; and why such research has not been made available to Australian education. One suspects that the tests are being used as a basis for research, not as an end product of it. Any test assumes a

'syllabus' and an area of agreement. But why Nesfield? Why not Fries or Chomsky, or Halliday or Dixon? No longer can we assume to be true things which we all know to be true.

And what of regional and social differences? Is a syllabus in English suitable to a girl living in Huonville appropriate to a boy in Wilcannia? or in Carlton? Are we certain that the course of study in Victoria is exactly right for children of indentured Chinese labourers on the phosphate island of Nauru? Because that is the syllabus they follow on that pinpoint outcrop of the Pacific. And within our own states. I suspect there are greater differences between students in sub-cultures within Victoria than there are between, say, those in capital cities of Australia. To my knowledge not much research goes on to determine the different needs of students in different towns and cities, though I believe some such study is beginning. The differing courses and matriculation entrances to Australian universities imply different students, different needs, different assumptions. (Though I have never seen a statement of the research on which these assumptions are based, and I suspect that I never shall.)

I do not propose to continue this display of professional hypochondria, but I want to suggest to you that until there is adequate professional research into curricula, the individual teacher has at least as strong a claim as anybody else to know best the needs of his students, and that those of us who are concerned with planning syllabuses should remember this always. If the idea of 'common standards' has sprung to your minds in the last few minutes, you may dismiss it as a traditional prejudice and a red herring.

The third assumption, that it is possible to state in clear detail what a course of study requires, is an attempt to discredit those vague assumptions of togetherness that a syllabus implies. I was once called into a headmaster's study to meet, I think, a Mr Clayton, the founder of the Toc H movement, who was on a world tour to make sure that the syllabus and curriculum of Toc H activities remained constant. Mr Clayton's remarks went like this: 'There's no need to tell you chaps what it's all about. I'm sure you know, so go out and keep up the good work.' I knew and still know nothing of Toc H. I've never been aware of what we 'chaps' should have known, or what good work we should have been keeping up. I believe that with patience and hard work we could have been told. Similarly with patience and hard work it is possible to state what we are trying to do when we teach English. We cannot afford to assume that all the other 'chaps' teaching English think as we think; that they will keep up the same 'good work' that we are keeping up. We need patiently to understand

18 / Warwick Goodenough

each other, and patiently to write down in detail what we are trying to do, often in quite tiny matters rather than in deathless general theories of education. This is one of the purposes of our state associations, their journals, and of the AATE and *English in Australia*. And the rapid growth, beyond all of our hopes, over the last three years, is partly from a new attitude of enquiry into complex new fields, and a growing impatience with the sometimes pretentious or reactionary humbug that passed as wisdom among the young as well as the old.

The last assumption concerns the relevance of material studied. Assuming that our courses should be somehow related to the real world, I have been watching with interest the various shifts and patches as battle is joined in Australia between the 'trads' and the 'mods'. The trads seem to take the view that *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost* and Chaucer's *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* are as relevant to Australia in 1967 as Camus' *The Plague* or Horne's *The Lucky Country*. The mods on the other hand seem to think that anything written before 1960 is pretty hard to relate to a rapidly changing world. These are only apparent views, but if you examine the syllabuses, say at matriculation in each state, Tasmania's Advanced Level wins the *trad.* prize, Victoria's English Expression is the most *mod.* The other states seem madly schizoid. How important is relevance? Can the relevance be assessed, or better still measured by designed tests, of texts from different periods? How large must relevance loom as a criterion of selection? Is it in fact our function to help students to come to terms with the world in which they must now live? Some certainly think so. Just as a parent sets out to make his child independent of himself, physically, emotionally and intellectually, so formal education may be partly concerned, at least, with making students independent of further formal education. (I make an exception of university students whose maturation has to be a little arrested to stay the course in contemporary universities.) But in the main some of us, perhaps many, would want our students to know the problems, especially the intellectual problems, they will have to solve once they leave school. The English public school tradition of a healthy mind in a healthy body, often made sure that the mind remained long adolescent, or at least remained adolescent longer than was necessary. There was much in that tradition that wanted to hold on to the past, to the world of childhood. So much of education looked back, wishing to preserve the past rather than face the present or the future, to preserve caste rather than solve caste difference. If there is some truth in such generalisations, I wonder how far the list of lectures given in a university—which became largely the syllabus in English—was concerned with preservation, rather than

self-preservation. John Holloway, writing in *The Listener* in January 1967, suggests that much of English prose has been a rearguard action to hold on to the world of the past, to hold on to what he calls the 'exploratory creative' use of language set up forever by Shakespeare as a model for England's civilisation.

And in Australia much of our thinking, and many of our English syllabuses have been dominated by the wish to preserve the past rather than to understand the present. Our city fathers first built museums, galleries and libraries, but where are the film studios, the opera houses and the cultural centres? Schools are notorious places of tradition, placing tradition (often in a rare fossil form) before relevance. Even an Elizabethan schoolboy, in a grammar school or a charity school, read his Plutarch, his Latin, his Greek, and grew familiar with the Graeco-Roman worlds. Yet out the door, beyond the droning of the construing of Plutarch, the whole world was changing gear. It was not, I think, in a classroom that Hobbes came to know Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Harvey or Ben Jonson. Schools run at least a neat century behind the writers who try to understand the here and now. In my own university course in the early fifties literature ended with Mathew Arnold, though a few daring students read *The Waste Land*. Joyce's *Ulysses* was locked in the university library safe and was only available by some such formality as taking the oath of allegiance. Our own students who, at the moment, are being taught by somebody taking our place for the day, will already have rejected the view of the world of Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir. Even the *nouvelle vague* has already broken and gone underground. Surely part of our courses, what we teach, should be concerned with writers trying to come to terms with this very demanding, very exciting, very dangerous decade. I do not in any way suggest that students should be encouraged to *accept* a writer's view of the world, or a writer's solution to the problems. But I think we should help them to understand them. Pippa has long passed. The Forsaken Merman has grown science fiction legs and lives in an apartment over the drug store. And Hardy's characters are locked up where they belong. Should we more often take our heads out of the sand? (Admittedly the ostrich, erect, is always in danger of decapitation by low-flying aircraft, but at least he sees them coming. The ostrich with his head under the sand does not know when pain will come, nor from which embarrassing direction.)

In a sense I have avoided the issue of the subject by saying that only proper research, by professionals, with all the tools of modern science, will produce syllabuses that will stand up to rigid scrutiny, that are designed to meet a need, that can be defended by fact, not by the

20 / *Warwick Goodenough*

weight of voices. Until that time comes, and especially when that time comes, teachers themselves, in primary schools and secondary schools as well as in universities, are in a position to know the needs of their students and to design syllabuses. Finally I have tried to emphasize one criterion of selection, the importance of relevance and the inclusion of some contemporary material.

I want to end on a practical note. If I am cornered and asked to say in a practical way what we should teach, one reply might be this. You will remember probably that moment in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Mitya suddenly comes to terms with part of reality and with himself, and sees a new relevance between himself and the world in which he has to live: identifies himself, if you like, with the reality of which he is a part.

He was driving somewhere in the Steppes, and a peasant was driving him in a cart with a pair of horses through snow and sleet. Not far off was a village; he could see the black huts, and half the huts were burned down, there were only the charred beams sticking up. And as they drove in, there were peasant women drawn up along the road, a lot of women, a whole row, all thin and wan, with their faces a sort of brownish colour, especially one at the edge, a tall bony woman, who looked forty, but might have only been twenty, with a long thin face. And in her arms was a little babe crying. And her breasts seemed so dried up that there was not a drop of milk in them. And the child cried and cried, and held out its little bare arms, with its little fists blue from cold.

'Why are they crying? Why are they crying?' Mitya asked as they dashed gaily by.

'It's the babe,' answered the driver. 'The babe weeping.'

And Mitya was struck by his saying, in his peasant way, 'the babe', and he liked the peasant calling it 'the babe'. There seemed more pity in it.

'But why is it weeping?' Mitya persisted stupidly. 'Why are its little arms bare? Why don't they wrap it up?'

'Why, they're poor people, burnt out. They've no bread. They're begging because they've been burnt out.'

'No, no,' Mitya, as it were, still did not understand. 'Tell me, why is it those poor mothers stand there? Why are people poor? Why is the babe poor? Why is the steppe barren? Why don't they hug and kiss each other? Why don't they sing songs of joy? Why are they so dark from the black misery? Why don't they feed the babe?'

And he felt that, though his questions were unreasonable and senseless, yet he wanted to ask just that, and he had to ask it just in that way. And he felt a passion of pity, such as he had never known before, rising in his heart, that he wanted to cry, that he wanted to do something for them all, so that the babe should weep no more, so that the dark-faced, dried-up mother should not weep, that no one should shed tears again from that moment, and he wanted to do it at once, regardless of all obstacles, with all the recklessness of the Karamazovs...

'I've had a good dream, gentlemen,' he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face.

Some such 'good dream' is perhaps what we should teach, but please don't ask me to write it in the form of a syllabus directive.