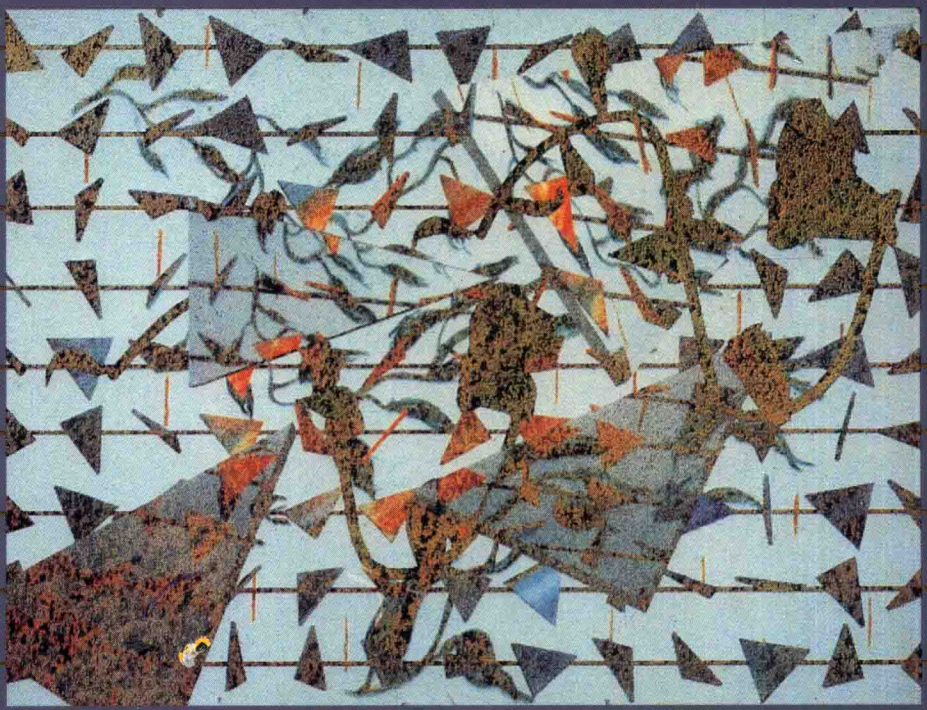
# Language and Reflection



## An Integrated Approach to Teaching English

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# Acknowledgments

When the five of us taught the Professional Semester, an experimental program of courses for future teachers, in the fall of 1988, we had no intention of writing a book. We simply wanted to do the best possible job with the group of prospective English teachers who had signed on at the University of Michigan for twelve credits of methods, observation in schools, advanced expository writing, and literature study. This block of courses gave us an opportunity to draw on our 100+ collective years of teaching and to think together about what it means to teach English. We and the students challenged one another, addressed complicated issues, and continually reexamined ideas throughout the semester. Without the 1988 Professional Semester, this book could not have been written. A timely visit from Robert Miller, Education Editor at Macmillan, helped us see that writing a book could enable us to share our thoughts with some of our colleagues, and that our differences in perspectives and backgrounds could enrich the book just as they had enriched the Professional Semester. We are grateful to Robert for extending our collaboration across several years.

Determined to enact our vision of collaboration in the process of writing, we worked as a group to create an overview for the whole book. During the process of drafting and revising each chapter, each of us was involved at some stage. Mallory Hiatt, secretary for the Joint Ph.D. in English and Education at the University of Michigan, made our active collaboration possible by spending many busy hours at her computer. Thank you, Mallory.

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# Introduction

> What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present world.
>
> Annie Dillard
> *An American Childhood*

In choosing to teach, you take on the role of assisting young people to come awake and to discover their places in the world, even as you are coming awake to the profession of teaching. You've chosen a complicated task, and chances are you won't know whether you will become a good teacher until you try to catch and jump on the spinning globe of classroom life. It is also true that your chances for success will be greatly enhanced through research and reflection before you step into that world. You might ask yourself: What does it mean for students to open their lives in the English classroom? How do reading and writing in the classroom allow students to discover not only their present world, but past worlds, other worlds, too?

You may be a prospective teacher taking a methods course or you may be an experienced teacher interested in further growth. In either case, this book asks you to examine your beliefs about language, the beliefs of other educators, and the implications of those beliefs for English classes, where the primary goal is to foster language development through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We offer it is a catalyst to the ongoing process of research and reflection that is an essential part of good teaching.

The teachers and students who come to life in the brief scenarios opening several of the chapters are composites, although they have been drawn from our experiences; the students and teachers we quote in other contexts are real people. We draw upon them to show the various ways that English can be taught, emphasizing the complementary nature of all facets of language learning. We believe that the theory of language and language learning that an English teacher embraces determines how the various domains of English (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are incorporated into classroom activities. The four perspectives on language—as artifact, as development, as expression, as social construct—are quite different from each other, although they overlap in places; some ideas and techniques are applicable to more than one perspective.

We have included examples of the way you might go about implementing each approach at different levels and in different kinds of classrooms. These suggestions are not "lesson plans" in the usual sense; instead they demonstrate the kinds of resources or strategies you might use to create your own teaching plans, suited to your particular classroom context. In addition to the four major perspectives on language and language learning, this book addresses the history of the teaching of English and the effect that history has on present-day teaching, the personal and social factors essential to understand individual students and particular classrooms, the various methods of evaluation English teachers can use, and the societal forces that impinge upon the English classroom.

Keep in mind that coming awake to a teaching life can only happen with practical experience in a classroom; still, you will be better prepared to teach if you reflect on your initial classroom observations, consider alternatives, and begin early on to articulate your beliefs about kids, language, and learning. As you read this text, you will begin to develop a philosophy to guide your initial teaching experiences. We believe that this process begins by reflecting on your own experiences as a learner and the experiences of your fellow learners, as well as those of other English teachers, some of whom you will encounter in this book. Through such reflection, you can begin to identify who you want to become as a teacher of English.

We wrote this book in much the same way we would urge you to develop a theory of teaching—by collaboration and discussion. Each chapter was orginally drafted by two of the five authors and then the entire group discussed these drafts, offering suggestions and alternatives. For final revisions we shuffled the original pairs so that two different individuals did the last version of each chapter. During this process, different perspectives emerged and individual understanding was

broadened. Similarly, we believe that good teachers use many approaches, but that they jump into the teaching world as a particular place. As their experience grows, they do not remain immobilized in their location, but move consciously in and around the perimeters of that world, crossing boundaries and weaving circuitous paths. We hope that your reading of this text will help you begin to find your own place in the world of teaching at the same time that it introduces you to the many places where teachers play out their professional lives.

# Contents

# 1

# Why Teach English?

WHY TEACH ENGLISH? If you ask your peers or other, more experienced English teachers, their answers will probably range from "I love literature, and I want to help young people understand the contributions of great writers like Hawthorne and Shakespeare" to "Kids need to be able to read and write effectively in order to function in the world of work" to "I think students can boost their self-esteem by learning to write journals, stories, and poems."

Those personal reactions to the question point to a broader question: Why should a subject named English be part of school curricula? Responses to this question by citizens, politicians, and public figures coincide with what individual teachers tend to say during public discussions of the teaching of English. Individuals explain their reasons for teaching English in various and complicated ways, but their statements usually fit into one or more general categories. Similarly, at any given historical moment, one or two general reasons for including English in curricula dominate the public discussion, but these reasons also fit into categories.

## Reasons for Teaching English

Six primary reasons, or goals, which sometimes overlap, are frequently named when Americans argue the why and hows of literacy. (Although they are not assigned sole responsibility for it, English teachers

are seen as playing a major role in literacy education, so the term "literacy" is heard frequently when Americans talk about the teaching of English.) We discuss the six reasons here in their historical context.

- *To improve morality* From the time of the Reformation, Protestant religious groups have connected literacy with piety or devotion, and Europeans who came to the North American continent in the seventeenth century were no exception. These early immigrants believed that ability to read (the Bible, specifically) was essential to their salvation, and although the religious fervor of this group dissipated as the population in the United States became more diverse and more secular, the connection between reading and improvement of self remained in the public consciousness. Much of the power ascribed to religious texts was transferred to literature, and English was seen as a discipline capable of contributing to morality.

  English teachers who espouse this view assign special value to the study of literature. They assume that students will become better human beings if they read what British poet Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and said."
- *To prepare good workers* As American society became increasingly specialized and mechanized, politicians, industrialists, and educators tried to ease the transition from rural to urban life. Schooling was viewed as the key; as future workers, students could learn to be prompt, to obey authority figures, and to follow arbitrary schedules and routines. In this view, English teachers, especially those in classes geared for the non-college-bound, could help train workers.

  In English classrooms where training workers is the aim, functional literacy is the obvious goal. Students may be asked to write for the "real world"—business letters, forms, resumes—and to read such texts as manuals and newspaper want ads. They may also be asked to perform drills designed to improve their knowledge of correct usage, drills we often call "grammar."
- *To create an elite* While this purpose may seem somewhat inappropriate in a democratic society, it played a significant part in American public education. Concern about students' preparation for elite institutions has long dominated English curriculum planning. In 1894, the Committee of Ten was convened by the National Association of Education to examine the high school curriculum. Chaired by Harvard's Charles Eliot, the committee attempted to institutionalize a secondary English curriculum, developing a list of required readings and admissions criteria.

  Secondary school English teachers who are influenced by the "elitist" position tend to believe that students should be grouped according to ability level so that those in the college preparatory

track will be exposed to advanced work. The classes taught by such teachers tend to mirror college courses in method and emphasis and frequently include lectures about literature.

- *To produce good citizens* Obviously, this purpose is related to the previous ones. Citizens of a democracy must be literate in order to make informed decisions, the argument goes. Students should know the history of American ideas, should responsibly follow current events, and should acquire the (rather advanced) literacy skills needed for voting and becoming taxpaying wage earners.

  Many secondary English classrooms reflect this concern, focusing on dilemmas and decisions facing characters in texts by selected American writers. Frequently teachers who follow this approach impose a thematic organization on the curriculum. Certain concepts, said to be "American," are emphasized in discussions: religious tolerance, the importance of the individual, the pioneering spirit, and the work ethic.
- *To foster personal growth* Undergirding this goal is the notion that education—English studies specifically—can lead to happiness. By studying one's place in the world, by coming to understand the perspectives of other people and other cultures, one can enhance self-esteem and understanding.

  In English classrooms, teachers who emphasize personal growth may ask students to keep journals and make connections between their lives and literary texts. These teachers are typically less concerned about preparing students for a specific goal such as attending college and more interested in helping students become productive and well-adjusted adults.
- *To offset inequity* Although schooling has tended to sharpen economic and social disparities, its brightest promise is to promote equity. Women, minorities, and the poor have regarded public education with great hope; without education, these groups have virtually no access to economic or political power.

  English teachers trying to offset inequity lead students toward critical consciousness of power relationships and validate the literacy practices of students' particular cultures. This often means seeing the classroom walls as permeable and encouraging frequent communication between school and the larger world. Students in such classes often do projects—such as conducting interviews—that involve their own communities.

Two or more of these goals may dominate the basic rationale for English education at any point in history. For instance, in the late 1980s, E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* greatly affected public perceptions about what schools should teach. Columnists, parents, and some educators, bemoaning students' ignorance of Western texts, beliefs, and artifacts,

called for schools to teach canonical works. During that same period, however, a competing position, that schools should offset social and economic inequity by providing opportunities for so-called at-risk students, also received public attention. In addition, American businesses argued that public schools weren't equipping students with the necessary literacy skills for the workplace.

Just as more than one perspective can dominate public discussion at a given time in history, so individual English teachers frequently embrace more than one perspective as they plan their classes. The teacher who says, "I love literature, and I want to help young people understand the contributions of great writers like Hawthorne and Shakespeare," could, on the basis of this statement, be described as one whose goal is *to create an elite.* Yet this same teacher might also say, "I think students can boost their self-esteem by learning to write journals, stories, and poems," and thereby reveal himself or herself as a teacher whose goal is *to foster personal growth.*

# The History of English Instruction

As you think about becoming a teacher, the history of English instruction probably seems unimportant. Your mind no doubt turns to questions about classroom management and writing lesson plans. These things are, of course, important, but understanding the history of English instruction can give you valuable perspectives on today's classrooms. Faced with an unruly group of students, you may find comfort in the fact that you are not, like your counterpart of 100 years ago, expected to cane the troublemakers. More important, understanding the issues that have been central to English studies over the years may help you decide what to emphasize and how to proceed with a given unit of instruction.

Even as we trace the history of English instruction, we remind ourselves—and you—that the public discussions about English education have historically had remarkably limited effect on the classrooms of individual teachers. As the vintage photos on pages 20 and 21 demonstrate, the English classrooms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bear a number of similarities. Students still sit at desks placed in rows facing the teacher, and the teacher's desk is considerably larger and less movable than those assigned to students. Blackboards still cover the walls and serve as sources of information.

As you read this history, you will notice that we give considerably more attention to recent decades. This is deliberate. We believe that English instruction owes much of its current shape to decisions and movements that occurred within this last century.

Change in American schools has been contingent more upon demographic change than on shifts in public views or introduction of innova-

tive methodology. During the nineteenth century, for example, the belief in public education for all began to take hold nationally, and the number of schools in the United States grew significantly. Children who would have remained unschooled, working in fields, homes, or factories, instead began attending school en masse.

Immigration, emigration, and changing notions about what literacy entails affect public discussion profoundly, though not always explicitly. Therefore, to understand English instruction at any given historical juncture, we need to ask the following questions: Who attended school? For what purposes? If we keep these questions in the foreground, the history of English education becomes comprehensible and relevant to today's debate.

Reading and writing in the English language were the province of the earliest American schools. Puritan settlers passed laws requiring the formation of reading and writing schools in communities of a certain size before 1700, chiefly *to improve morality.* Schooling was seen as a means of warding off evil. Texts used in schools and texts owned by individual households were largely of a religious nature, and reading received more emphasis than writing, although simple writing tasks were assigned. Between 1640 and 1715 about 60 percent of male New Englanders were able to sign their names to legal documents; signing rates were slightly lower for white males in other colonies. Signing rates for women and for African Americans were dramatically lower, although there is some evidence that a majority of women colonists were able to read.

Schools assumed different functions as the colonies grew and prospered. In the middle of the eighteenth century, two other reasons for attaining literacy began to compete with religious motivations. As communities grew large enough to support schools and commerce, literacy became necessary for the workers who needed to keep accounts and correspond with clients. Thus an increasingly apparent goal in the teaching of English was *to create good workers.* In addition, those who had managed to accumulate wealth and power in the new society wanted to ensure their sons' positions as well; these families looked to the schools *to create an elite.*

The English curriculum in these early American schools focused on reading, writing, and grammatical skills. Pupils were expected to learn English grammar, to read short passages aloud, to spell, and to communicate in writing. Students often memorized passages from the Bible or from classical texts, but their exposure to English literature in school was limited to the occasional poem or brief prose passage.

After the Revolutionary War, literacy acquisition became important to the new nation. First, it was necessary *to produce good citizens.* The ability to read and write seemed crucial for the citizens of an American democracy. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without a newspaper, or newspapers without a