

IDEAS AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

THE
ENGLISH TEACHER'S
HANDBOOK

STEPHEN N. JUDY AND SUSAN J. JUDY

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Ideas and Resources
for Teaching
English

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PREFACE

Many of the materials in this book have their origin in a publication called *The Inkwell*, a monthly newsletter for English teachers, which we published over a two-year period. We had sensed in our university classes and at professional meetings a strong interest in practical, how-to-do-it materials for teachers, and found in *The Inkwell* a way of getting teaching ideas into the hands of a number of English and language arts teachers. At the suggestion of our friends and readers, however, we decided to condense and reorganize the materials into the present book form.

The reader will note that several of the sections of the book were originally drafted (for use in *The Inkwell*) by other authors. For their willingness to let us use their work in this book we want to thank Betsy B. Kaufman (Queens College), Pamela Waterbury (Washington, D.C.), Maggie Parish (University of North Carolina at Wilmington), and Ted Hipple (University of Florida). Their work has been blended with our own, however, and we take all responsibility for the accuracy and validity of the ideas in the book. We also wish to thank the people who read and critiqued early drafts of the manuscript for their careful, thoughtful, and detailed commentary: Carol Kuykendall (Houston Public Schools), Sy Yesner (Minneapolis Public Schools), Dan Kirby (University of Georgia), Patrick Courts (State University of New York at Fredonia), and Charles R. Kline, Jr. (University of Texas). In addition, we want to acknowledge that a great many of the ideas in the book were gleaned from our students at Northwestern University, Michigan State University, Central Michigan University, and the University of British Columbia, and from participants in our workshops at meetings and conferences in many states.

Finally, we want to give special thanks to Paul O'Connell, John Covell, and the staff at Winthrop Publishers, first, for their enthusiasm for the project

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary English Teaching: Some Basic Premises

We teach in dramatic, exciting, and controversial times. The past two decades have seen extraordinary changes in the schools and in the teaching of English. You merely need to think back to as recently as the 1960s, to your own schooling, perhaps, or to your early years of teaching to recall when:

- a survey revealed that *Silas Marner* was required reading in 75 percent of this nation's high schools;

- paperback books were a novelty in English classes, and the "important" question being asked by administrators was, "Will paperbacks hold up as well as hardbound books in the classroom?"

- *Catcher in the Rye* was thought a dirty book;

- the only electives in the English program were "supplementary" courses like *Journalism* or *Yearbook*, and the only "choice" offered to students was whether they wanted to enter the college preparatory or the business track; and

- the movies shown in English classes were grainy, black-and-white affairs with titles like *Using Lively Adverbs* or *The Life and Writing of Stephen Vincent Benét*.

So things have changed—and for the better. The use of media, paperback books, elective courses and thematic units, and alternative kinds of language study have made English classes vastly more interesting and productive than they were two decades ago. "English," which used to mean little more than grammar, the history of literature, and an occasional five-hundred-word theme, has burst out of its traditional boundaries, so that today young people read contemporary literature as well as classic, compose in speech and media as well as writing, and become immersed in the study of language in society rather than arranging words in artificially constructed sentence diagrams.

With these changes have evolved new roles for teachers. English teaching was once a matter of simply following the course outline or textbook in sequences

that were obvious, if dull: “The sentence” always followed “parts of speech”; “organizing a composition” followed “paragraphs”; early-twentieth-century “modern” literature followed “realism and naturalism.” Teaching methodology consisted largely of something called “lecture-discussion,” with the teacher talking most of the time, either telling the students what they were supposed to know or quizzing them on whether they knew it. At regular intervals, the good teacher stuffed 150 compositions into a briefcase or shopping bag and trundled home to spend weekends or evenings penciling in critical comments, most of which were ignored by the students.

Now English teachers talk less, and their students talk more. The rows of seats have been broken down for many class activities, and young people talk as much to each other as to the teacher. Reading and writing programs are frequently individualized, so that literary eras no longer follow one another in strict chronology, and original writing flows from the students’ experiences rather than from the dictates of the composition book. Teachers used to be preachers; now they are good listeners, too, hearing students’ concerns, their ideas, their insights.

This kind of teaching is unquestionably exciting. It allows a teacher constantly to take a fresh approach with his or her courses—teaching new literature and new media, looking for alternate directions in composition, finding out fascinating things about students.

But contemporary English teaching is also terribly demanding, for it creates a drain on material resources, on the teacher’s energy, originality, and creativity. While English teachers once could anticipate teaching the same courses and books over and over again (stories about teachers who had memorized the text are no exaggeration), today’s teacher is constantly reading new texts, surveying fresh paperbacks, and planning original courses and units.

Yet along with the breadth of English—which, we think, makes it an exciting, vibrant subject to teach—comes what seems the singular intent of school systems to create unteachable settings for English teachers. For example, despite the fact that the student load assigned to teachers has been under attack for fifty years, the size of English teachers’ classes has not diminished at all in this century; in economically troubled times, it has actually increased. English/language arts teachers regularly have to face 150 or more students, five days a week, 180 days a year. (“Why don’t you teach more writing?” asks the same critical administrator who will, next September, calmly add two students to the load of every English teacher because of “fiscal constraints” that do not allow him to replace a retiring teacher.)

The schools cling to a number of, at best, cumbersome and, at worst, obsolete structures and traditions that make teaching difficult: bell schedules; alpha-

bet grades; the bureaucracy of tardy slips, admits, attendance dossiers, field trip permissions; and PA announcements in the middle of a class period. In many schools, “innovative” or creative teaching is viewed with suspicion. Janitors complain that the movable desks aren’t kept in straight rows (just as if they were bolted down); principals observe, “All this self-expression is well and good, but just plain composition would suffice”; parents puzzle over the new ways and, seeking safety, lament the disappearance of what they recall as “the good old days.”

In such a setting, it becomes easy for teachers literally to burn out. After a brief fling with contemporary teaching techniques, many retreat in the direction of the tradition—to the grammar book or anthology—“spicing up” their lessons with an occasional film or creative writing assignment, but essentially teaching from a conservative base. Alternatively, they quit; they go back to school for a law or business degree. Or they stay in the profession and simply become pessimists, unhappy with their teaching, their students, and themselves.

Yet a great many English teachers not only survive, but thrive, despite the difficult settings and complex times in which they find themselves. One sees and hears them at teacher conventions, faculty meetings, PTA sessions. We think they represent a majority of English teachers in this day and age. Without them, contemporary English would disappear from the schools.

It is in support of these teachers that this book has been prepared. Whether you are an undergraduate in a methods course getting ready for your first formal teaching assignment or someone who has been out in the field for a decade or two, we feel you need all the help you can get. Faced with an enormous teaching load, conflicting demands, yet still wanting to do new and interesting things in your classes, you need ideas and resources to supplement your own. *The English Teacher’s Handbook* supplies them. Its principal function is to serve as an idea book, to offer suggestions to add to your lessons.

A great many of the teaching ideas presented here grow directly from our own teaching experiences, which include urban and suburban schools; private and public schools; and preschool, elementary, middle-school, junior-high, senior-high, and college students. Other ideas have been gleaned from experienced teachers who have participated in our university classes and workshops at professional meetings. The ideas are thus “classroom tested,” and we feel confident that you will find them useful and practical.

At the same time, we feel it important to enter two cautionary notes:

1. *The teaching ideas presented here are meant to be catalysts to your own thinking, not surefire gimmicks.* Adapt them to your needs, to your students, to your classes. Don’t simply pull an idea from page 175 or 222 and expect it to

work without modification. Further, don't pick ideas just because they are unusual or because they have shock value. Students can be tricked, manipulated, and "gimmicked" only so many times before the novelty wears off.

2. *Don't use this book as a "cookbook."* The ideas in the book are not "recipes," and the book is intended to supplement your course planning, not to replace it. Don't make your teaching a smorgasbord of ideas picked at random from here and there. Thus, we begin the book with an intensive section on course planning, and we urge you to use the book to plan the broad dimensions of your course and curriculum before selecting individual activities.

We have also been highly selective in choosing the ideas presented here. We don't have much respect for so-called eclectic teaching, which praises any idea that "seems to work" without regard for pedagogical or philosophical consistency. The ideas we recommend show internal consistency; we have not included techniques that superficially seem to work but lack a sound rationale. Thus, we won't present ideas on "101 Novel Approaches to the Book Report!" (we think that "genre" is not a particularly effective way of helping students enjoy literature), but we will explain *many* ways of helping students extend their responses to literature in writing (and speaking and media work). We won't show you ways of "Making Grammar Fun!" (we think such techniques frequently sugarcoat the teaching of terminology that doesn't help students write or speak better anyway), but we will show you many ways of exploring language use and misuse in school and society, including an exploration of contemporary approaches to teaching English syntax. We will not present techniques on teaching "The Five-Paragraph Theme" (which, as someone remarked, is a "pedagogical device," not an art form), but we will suggest dozens of ways of engaging students in writing well-organized expository prose.

Underlying all of our discussions is the belief that *teachers* are at the heart of solving classroom teaching problems. We do not believe that change can be imposed from the outside. Growth in teaching evolves from within, from teachers who are willing to explore and experiment with new ideas and techniques and possibilities. *The English Teacher's Handbook* is designed to aid and enrich that kind of teaching.

Some Basic Premises

We want to describe our basic beliefs, premises, and postulates about teaching contemporary English. This is a credo of sorts, but certainly not dogma,

for English teaching is too unsettled a field for anyone—textbook author or teacher—to offer inflexible fiats about what *should* or *must* happen in English classrooms. In presenting our premises, however, we want to show you some of the principles upon which teaching ideas for later sections were based. Ideas or strategies selected for the book had to be consistent with and enhance these seven basic premises:

1. *Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are learned by doing, not principally by studying abstractions or doing exercises.* More and more it seems clear to us that English is a learn-by-doing skill, that the most important role of the teacher is not telling students about language, but getting them to use it. To this end, the *Handbook* is aimed at helping teachers develop a *language-centered classroom*, a place where students are engaged constantly in using language: using a rich variety of materials, reading and writing and speaking in many modes of discourse.

If you are a propaganda analyst, however, you will have noted the waffle words, “not principally,” in our premise. We do not claim that language is learned without teacher intervention, and it seems to us that some direct discussion of language skills is important. However, decades of research into language learning demonstrate persuasively that such study must be peripheral to actual language use.

2. *English/language arts classes should expose students to as many different language forms and genres as possible.* In recent years there has been increasing discussion of “survival English” for career preparation, with a corresponding devaluing of any “nonessential” language forms (especially poetry). We think such an emphasis is extremely narrow and, in the long range, incapacitating to people who find themselves indoctrinated into a limited range of language skills. While we don’t claim that writing poetry will get students good jobs or that learning to critique television programs will land one a job with NBC or *TV Guide*, we feel strongly that the English program should allow students to experience a variety of reading and writing forms and genres: creative writing as well as expository, popular literature as well as classic. English teachers must extend the dimensions of literacy, not restrict them.

3. *Creativity is not synonymous with chaos.* In the heyday of student-centered education in the 1970s, a great many people talked about the need to emphasize creativity in English. Yet many critics seemed to muddle this concept with their own vague dislike of “permissivism” and attacked contemporary English for refusing to teach “discipline”—both the discipline of language and literature and the discipline of classroom behavior. In fact, to suggest that language

use is creative merely emphasizes that students must learn to assimilate their experiences and ideas and write and talk about them in original, independent, “creative” ways. Students need not, in fact, write poems to write creatively; a good piece of reportage or research can be highly creative. Similarly, creative expression, if it is to reach its audience, must be disciplined and controlled. We refuse, in short, to accept the traditional dichotomies that separate writing into creative and an unspecified opposite, conceptions that stereotype the creative person as somehow “different”—unruly, undisciplined, and otherworldly. In fact, we’ll go a step further and present a related premise: *Every student in every class is creative*, which simply means that every student you ever teach has the potential to deal sensibly and imaginatively with his or her experiences through the medium of language. It is the job of the English teacher to foster that creativity.

4. *Correctness does not stifle self-expression.* We agree with those who argue that “good” English is far less important than the content of what a student reads, writes, or speaks. We also agree that the schools have spent far too much time attempting to regularize the dialects of speakers of nonstandard English. But we think it would be extreme to dismiss correctness altogether or to tell children that it “doesn’t matter.” It obviously *does*, and the schools cannot ignore it. If correctness is not made an end in itself, is not seen as the most important part of the learning experience, if students are not misled about the nature of correctness, and if correctness is made a natural part of writing for audiences, it need not destroy student self-expression and, in fact, can actually enhance the student’s abilities to share ideas successfully.

5. *Popular literature is not incompatible with the classics; media studies are not incompatible with literary work.* Some teachers seem to fear that allowing popular materials—adolescent novels, best-sellers, TV programs—into the English class is debasing and points the way to the death of the classics. We feel that such is not the case and that arbitrary debates on the merits of different genres and forms is either harmful or pointless. The plays of William Shakespeare, for example, will survive quite nicely without the interference of English teachers claiming that thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds “must” read them to be “properly educated.” At the same time, generations of thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds have shown that they are quite capable of enjoying Shakespearean plays when those plays are dramatized or filmed rather than locked within the pages of a textbook. A balanced English program will include classic as well as contemporary literature and will draw naturally on a wide range of forms and media.

6. *English must integrate its diverse components: literature, reading, composing, speaking, listening, film, video, grammar, semantics, and so forth.* Integrated Eng-

lish is not easy to achieve. In fact, it's simpler in many respects to isolate the parts, teaching something called "literature" on Tuesdays or Thursdays and doing "composition" on Fridays. But this fragments literacy. Although this book may seem to imply breaking down English by its division into subsections—"Literature and Reading," "Teaching Composition," "Language Study," and "Multimedia English"—we want to emphasize that such divisions are for convenience only. Within each section, we will show the ways activities can be reintegrated. In a good contemporary English class, these components will flow naturally into one another.

7. *The teaching and learning of English is a natural, pleasurable, invigorating experience.* We're distressed by the way English has, in some schools, become a hated or feared subject, usually because of overemphasis on correctness and traditional literature. Using language is, above all, a delightful experience, and that delight is shared equally by the babbling two-year-old, the punning nine-year-old, the jiving high-school student, and the joking adult. Reading, when not bogged down with enormous critical compendia or those annoying "comprehension questions," is an enriching experience. Writing, when freed from an obsessive concern for correctness, is a comfortable, engaging activity for most young people and adults. To capitalize on this natural pleasure in language, one need not create an English classroom that is a "circus" or reduce all language activity to fun and games. Nevertheless, "fun" is an important word and crops up frequently in our discussions, whether it be the "fun" of writing jokes and riddles or the serious fun of preparing a persuasive essay on a cause in which one believes. Two popular books, *The Joy of Cooking* and *The Joy of Sex*, were "how to" books that combined discussion of naturally pleasurable activities with techniques and resources for making that pleasure greater. Perhaps we should have titled this book *The Joy of Teaching English*.