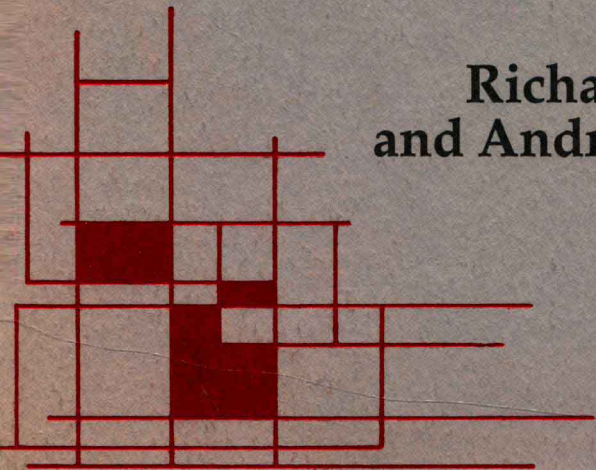


The English Coalition Conference: Democracy through Language

Edited by
Richard Lloyd-Jones
and Andrea A. Lunsford



Foreword by
Wayne C. Booth

The English Coalition Conference: Democracy through Language

Edited by

Richard Lloyd-Jones
University of Iowa

Andrea A. Lunsford
The Ohio State University

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

Modern Language Association
10 Astor Place, New York, New York 10003

NCTE Editorial Board: Donald R. Gallo, Raymond Rodrigues, Dorothy Strickland, Brooke Workman, Charles Suhor, *ex officio*, Michael Spooner, *ex officio*

NCTE Staff Editor: Michelle Sanden Johlas

Cover Design: Michael J. Getz

Interior Design: Tom Kovacs for TGK Design

NCTE Stock Number 13818

© 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy where such endorsement is clearly specified.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

English Coalition Conference (1987 : Wye Plantation)

The English Coalition Conference : democracy through language /
edited by Richard Lloyd-Jones, Andrea A. Lunsford.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 0-8141-1381-8

1. English philology—Study and teaching—United States—
Congresses. 2. Language arts—United States—Congresses.

I. Lloyd-Jones, Richard, 1927- II. Lunsford, Andrea A., 1942-
III. Title.

PE1068.U5E49 1987

428'.007'073—dc19

88-36832

CIP

Foreword

I must confess that as I traveled, alone, toward a three-week conference to be held at an unknown "plantation" miles from nowhere, a conference with fifty-nine other English teachers, my heart did not exactly leap up in anticipation. It is not my notion of the ideal use of summertime to spend three weeks conferring about anything with anybody — especially if, as seemed likely, we would sit listening to lectures. The truth is that I was cursing myself for having let Phyllis Franklin, of the Modern Language Association, and Jane Christensen, of the National Council of Teachers of English, talk me into it. Three weeks! Not just three weeks with weekends off, but twenty-one solid consecutive working days — and no wives or husbands allowed! English teachers! Curriculum — that subject of all subjects that attracts the most clichés per conference-hour! "You could not pay me enough," I found myself muttering on the plane, "even if the subject raised the possibility of genuinely new results — and here I am, having 'volunteered' to be bored silly for three weeks, for nothing but board and room!"

Am I even an English teacher, I was asking myself, in any of the senses *they'll* have in mind? I teach "the humanities," I teach "rhetoric," I teach "literary criticism." But two-thirds of *them* will be elementary and high school teachers. Now, of course, I love elementary and high school teachers. My grandfather was one, my mother was one, my daughter has been one. Two cousins, one niece, and one nephew now are schoolteachers. Indeed, I have always said that "pre-higher-education" teachers are more important than "higher." No doubt it would be profitable to meet with some of them for a few days — letting them know, perhaps, of just how much we all appreciate what they do for us, and how much we sympathize with the circumstances in which they work. But three weeks!

Obviously I wouldn't be writing this foreword if my fears had proved justified. The time spent at Wye Plantation proved to be the most profitable conferring-time I'd ever spent — more profitable and exhilarating than the weeks spent at the Dartmouth Conference on a similar subject twenty years before, even more profitable than the staff

meetings I've shared each year with colleagues assigned to a given freshman course. It's in the nature of the case that neither this foreword nor the report that follows can give more than a pale shadow of why that was so. The heart of any prolonged and unique experience escapes reporter's language.

This report is written in the hope of addressing two audiences that are often thought to be antithetical: our colleagues in "English" (who travel under many different names: language arts, communications studies, media studies, linguistics, composition, rhetoric, and so on) and the great public on whose support we all finally depend. Too much official talk lately has suggested a great chasm between the two groups. "We representatives of the educated public, we government officials and business executives, know exactly what you teachers should teach and why; and we accuse you of ignorance, cowardice, laziness, and greed." "We teachers know that you public complainers haven't a clue about the actual conditions under which we work; you have never faced children of indifferent or hostile parents; you have never tried, as many of us must do, to teach reading and writing to 150 or more students each week. And you ignore our successes and exaggerate our failures."

At the conference we soon grew beyond such reductive polarities. Perhaps we would have done so even sooner had we not been presented, in the very first session, with a self-styled spokesman for "the public" who seemed to tout a kind of training we all mistrusted. An official of the Department of Education gave the opening address and charged us to join a grand national repudiation of the "skills movement," in the name of new discoveries about the importance of information. Relying on E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* as his scriptural text for the day, the official charged us either to embrace Hirsch's list of nearly 5,000 "cultural literacy" terms, or to come up with a list of our own.

I've never seen an audience more effectively united by one hour-long speech. We all knew that whatever else we might want to say to each other, we must repudiate that spokesman's narrow, misinformed, programmatic vision of ourselves, our history, and our charges. To be asked to impart bits of isolated information, to be asked even to think about that kind of goal in isolation from all the difficulties and complexities every teacher faces, simply trivialized the work we all do and love. Whether we were thinking of graduate students or of first graders, whether we had light teaching loads or heavy, whether we taught honors sections or remedial sections, whether our training was in linguistics, language arts, media studies, or critical theory, we knew

that the last thing American education needs is one more collection of inert information, a nostrum to be poured raw into minds not actively engaged in reading, thinking, writing, and talking. Not only did we believe that abstracted lists of terms would not motivate our students to become spontaneous learners; we were sure that they would increase the tendency of too many of our schools to kill whatever spontaneity the children bring when they enter school. (This is not the place to discuss the growing controversy over Hirsch's book; a good introduction to the issues can be found in a special collection, *Profession 1988*, published by the Modern Language Association. Nor can I do justice here to our sustained probing of just how America might improve the circumstances under which too many teachers must work — circumstances that no amount of tinkering with lists to be learned will remedy.)

Though that speech (and one that followed a day or two later by Hirsch himself) had the virtue of pulling us together, it did deflect us, initially, into a good deal of lamentation about indifference and hostility in our various "constituencies." (I was repeatedly shocked by accounts of the obstacles serious high school teachers encounter daily.) But we soon got that out of our systems and settled down to the harder work of discovering whether, in addition to a common enemy, we could find common goals that applied to all levels of teaching, from the elementary years through the doctoral level. Could those university professors whose immediate thinking was reported in talk of "paradigm shifts" and "post-structuralism" meet those elementary teachers who felt that their teaching lives were corrupted by "sequencing" and "basal readers"? And could any program we might agree on make sense to a public alarmed by the "decline of standards" and the "neglect of the classics"? I think that most of us were surprised, as the days passed, to discover not only that we did share a mission, but that it was one we believed most of our "publics" would also embrace, if they could only take part in our kind of extended discussion about the teaching and learning requirements in a society like ours.

In short, we finally hit upon a truth that was by no means self-evident at the beginning: If you put committed English teachers together — those who are willing to spend as much as three weeks on the subject without being paid for it — and ask them to hammer out, in writing, the goals and methods they are most committed to; if you do not lecture them but spend the time in give-and-take discussion about their experiences and hopes and fears; and if you do not fix them to an agenda preestablished by some national organization or foundation — if, in short, you can run a conference like the one

reported on here, you will find that they in fact share not just a profession with a set of assumptions and prejudices, but a *vocation*, a *calling*, a *commitment*.

If that commitment could be summarized by any one participant's statement, we would not have needed the conference in the first place. My way of putting it, added now to the variety you will find throughout this book, is that we are in this curious profession because we see "teaching English" as the best way we know of "enfranchising," "liberating," "enabling," "empowering" those who will make our future. We are all struggling — most of us paid less than we would be paid in other jobs, many of us working under intolerable conditions — to lead our students to "take responsibility for their own meanings." We hope that those we teach will become "self-starters," independent readers, thinkers, writers, and speakers: critical, active participants in a complex verbal culture, educated to do something more than spew back the floods of words that threaten to drown us all. As the report of the college section says, we seek to prepare students, whatever their ages, "who are active learners and who are able to reflect critically on their own learning. . . . In an information age, citizens need to make meaning — rather than merely consume information."

Active learners, not passive receivers: such language obviously is not brand new in our educational history. But the echoes in that language of John Dewey and other "progressive" theorists should not lead any reader to see us, as some of our critics have suggested, as falling back into the tired formula, "Teach the child, not the subject." To do so would be to engage in precisely the kind of polar thinking that has plagued too much recent criticism of the schools. We do not choose between "the child" and this or that ideal "subject." We choose subjects which, by their nature, if taught properly, will lead the child eagerly through increasingly independent steps toward full adult, self-sustained learning.

Obviously there was nothing radically new in this enterprise we discovered together: If we had not already been to some degree engaged in it, we could not have discovered our commonality at Wye. What was new was our having enough time together — three weeks soon began to look too short! — to get beyond our stereotypes, to listen to each other, to try to understand and fail to understand and then try again.

How did our astonishing agreement come about? The full story will never emerge from any one account, because each of us came with

different prejudices and left with a different sense of what could and should be done back home. (Peter Elbow is now writing another book that will fill in more details.) But since I consider the process of the conference at least as important as our final recommendations, I should like to underline the special intensity of our daily labors. Morning, noon, and night, weekdays and weekends, we sorted through our differences of vocabulary, and we thus *had time* to move beyond superficial misunderstandings. Part of each day we spent with those who customarily taught on our own “level,” whether elementary, secondary, or college. (I chose to meet with the secondary teachers, in the mistaken notion that I already knew what my college-level colleagues would have to say.) But we also met each day in scrambled groups, trying to distinguish those disagreements that were substantive from those that sprang from mere differences in vocabulary.

As we did so, we found that our own “learning problems” resembled those of our students back home. Though we came into each session thinking of ourselves as open-minded “listeners,” most of us proved to be astonishingly resistant to taking in what the others really had in mind. Just like our students, we could not grasp on first hearing any concept that was the least bit different from what we had embraced before. And like our students, we discovered that a given phrasing revealed new depths on a second and third encounter. For example, toward the end of one morning’s discussion in the secondary group, we came to enthusiastic unanimity on the question of what kind of active learner our high school classes should foster — only to have a colleague point out that our notes from the *previous* session had reported precisely the same conclusion, only in slightly different language. We had “learned” it once, then in a sense forgot it by the next day, only to “learn” it again, but at a deeper level. In short, our own learning illustrated just why our students show so much resistance to learning: like theirs, it was inevitably “recursive,” spiraling, requiring repetition after repetition, as concepts that were initially only words, even repugnant words, deepened into intelligible concepts.

Reflecting on what our uniquely prolonged experience means should help readers to think about just how this report might best be read and used. It has been written by many teachers, each of them to some degree employing terms that may to other teachers carry misleading connotations. When I have shown certain sections to colleagues, I have been shocked by their readiness to leap into quite misleading inferences about what this or that recommendation means. The only antidote to such misreadings will be, first, to read the whole report

before concluding what any one part "really means," and then to do some rereading, asking just what might be implied for "my teaching life" by what we recommend. Again and again, in correspondence since the gathering, I have been told by my new acquaintances from the conference, "My teaching this year has been radically improved by what we said to each other at Wye." It may be too much to expect that effect from reading any book, but that is, of course, one result we hope for.

That result is least likely to occur, in my own view, if well-meaning readers try to impose our conclusions on their colleagues as hard-and-fast truths. All of our recommendations are interpretable in diverse ways, good and bad. Each of them could be corrupted, for example, by any administrator who decided to impose it on teachers who had no chance to think it through in relation to local circumstances. Again and again at the conference, teachers reported that whenever they had been empowered, locally, to work together to decide what the curriculum should be *in their circumstances*, morale was transformed and student performance improved remarkably. In contrast, whenever goals and methods were imposed from the top, without full and open sharing of experience, the results were meager or even harmful. Thus, the best outcome for this report would be the provision of conferences and workshops as much like ours as possible: "mini-coalitions" that would, like ours, allow for a genuine digging beneath surfaces to determine just how, given the teachers and students and parents and administrators and physical plants available *here and now*, we might turn passive or hostile or complacent children toward lifetimes of active learning.

After all, it is only when we teachers engage in reflection on what we want to learn and why, only when we "take responsibility for our own meanings," that we become models of what we want our students to become. Only if we lead our students to take such active responsibility will they become full participants in the political and cultural life they will meet after they leave our care.

Wayne C. Booth
University of Chicago

Acknowledgments

The report that follows represents a most remarkable collaborative effort. In every important sense, the authors of this report are the sixty teachers who gathered at the Wye Plantation in the summer of 1987 (see Appendix A). The substance of what follows comes from them; we and our hardworking coalition editorial committee have only attempted to convey that substance clearly and accurately. To that committee and to all participants in the Coalition Conference, then, we are profoundly grateful. In addition, we are indebted to Gerald Nelms and Beverly Bruck, both of whom worked cheerfully and tirelessly on the preparation of this manuscript.

Richard Lloyd-Jones
Andrea A. Lunsford

Participating Associations

The professional associations that together form the English Coalition are:

ADE	Association of Departments of English
CEA	College English Association
CLA	College Language Association
CSSEDC	Conference of Secondary School English Department Chairs
CCCC	Conference on College Composition and Communication
CEE	Conference on English Education
MLA	Modern Language Association
NCTE	National Council of Teachers of English

Individuals who attended the Coalition Conference are listed in Appendix A, page 67.

Abbreviations

In addition to the abbreviations for the associations which form the English Coalition (see page xiv), this volume uses the following abbreviations in place of the full names of these programs and professional organizations.

ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language
ADFL	Association of Departments of Foreign Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ENL	English as a Native Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
IATESOL	International Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
IRA	International Reading Association
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NEH	National Endowment for the Humanities
TESOL	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Introduction

What does it mean to be a teacher of English, from kindergarten through graduate school? What common challenges unite us? What issues divide us? During July 1987, a coalition of English associations sponsored a conference to consider such questions and to chart directions for the study of English into the twenty-first century. A complete file of their exploratory answers and deliberations — of all materials produced before and during the conference — is stored at the offices of the coalition members and of the various granting agencies. Many of the participants drew on these materials to prepare essays, articles, speeches, and news items following the conference, and Peter Elbow is at work on his reflections on the conference, a volume which will be published by the Modern Language Association in late 1989. In addition, a collection of essays titled *Stories to Grow On: Demonstrations of Language Learning in K-8 Classrooms* (Heinemann, 1988) has been developed by the participants of the elementary strand and edited by Julie Jensen.

To date, however, no brief, concise report of the Coalition Conference has been available. The document before you, therefore, aims to fill this gap by presenting the major conclusions reached by conference participants about the teaching of English. This introductory section provides background information about the conference; the second section provides edited versions of position papers adopted, in principle, by conference participants; the third section includes some sketches designed to illustrate the problems and opportunities facing English studies; and the appendixes offer various details of record — participants, bibliographies, and schedules.

The Coalition Conference grew from seeds planted by representatives of eight professional associations concerned with teaching English in the United States. The officers and staff members of six of these organizations — the Association of Departments of English (ADE), the College English Association (CEA), the College Language Association (CLA), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) — met for the first time at the

1982 MLA convention to discuss subjects of general interest. Although the associations represented different constituencies within the field and were not, for the most part, accustomed to talking with one another, so urgent were their common concerns that they agreed to continue meeting after their annual conventions. Eventually, they decided to form a coalition, which the Conference on English Education (CEE) and the Conference of Secondary School English Department Chairs (CSSEDC) later joined.

While the ad hoc meetings held after conventions identified many problems, they left precious little time to consider implications. And since the associations often sent different people as representatives, the meetings lacked continuity. Under these shifting circumstances, discussions of even the same topic varied from meeting to meeting. But the educational reform movement provided a useful focus for conversation, which became increasingly purposeful as association representatives talked about a constructive response to the criticisms of the schools that were appearing with increasing frequency. The group concluded that more time was needed to explore this topic than was available at the end of a national convention. Thus, with the support of the Exxon Education and Rockefeller foundations, they arranged for a longer meeting.

The coalition met for several days in 1984 at NCTE headquarters in Urbana, Illinois, to hammer out a general statement that might be helpful to those interested in educational reform. (The statement is included as Appendix E.) At this meeting, participants became painfully aware of differences on exactly what should be taught and on how English teachers might respond to changing student interests and needs. In time, this recognition led to plans for a longer conference, one that would allow a larger group of teachers and scholars to conduct a more thorough consideration of the issues. Twenty years before, the Anglo-American conference had convened at Dartmouth, paving the way for major effects on teaching in the schools and in colleges and universities. Since that meeting, changes — in the field, in the schools, in society, and in the student population — had led almost everywhere to new demands on English teachers and, here and there, to modifications in the teaching of English, about which there was little consensus. Coalition members hoped that a national conference would encourage a consensus on some issues and identify areas of disagreement on others.

In response to a proposal prepared by a committee of the coalition and then presented and administered on its behalf by MLA, the Andrew W. Mellon and Rockefeller foundations agreed to fund the

conference. Additional support came from the Exxon Education Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The sponsoring coalition members also contributed money and people to the task.

Unlike the Dartmouth Conference, which was attended primarily by college and university professors, the Coalition Conference brought together teachers from all levels of schooling. Each of the coalition associations shared in the responsibility of selecting the representatives who attended the conference. Coalition members also shared in the general planning of the conference, although they asked a small steering committee to work out the details and make the final arrangements. During the planning period, the steering committee met with the larger coalition group at the end of association conventions to report the committee's progress and to seek advice.

After years of planning, sixty teachers of English gathered from July 6 to 26, 1987, in rural solitude at the Aspen Institute's Wye Plantation in Maryland. As a whole or in subgroups, they met mornings, afternoons, and some evenings for lectures, discussions, reports, and demonstrations. Three subgroupings of all participants represented the level of the students being taught — elementary, secondary, or college. Three more groupings represented a systematic mixing of all participants, and those groups were reconstituted each week. For all meals, participants dined together graciously, even elegantly, at tables of eight people, all constantly shifting to encourage the spread of ideas and acquaintanceship. Between such assemblies, the teachers read, exercised, used word processors, and disseminated the results among themselves to the extent of wearing out three photocopying machines. The wide range of backgrounds and perspectives represented by people participating in the conference assured a thorough hearing of many conflicting views.

The conference program opened by addressing the changes that had taken place in students, curriculum, the school environment, and the larger community over the past ten to fifteen years. Participants then considered what they thought students should achieve in their formal study of language, writing, and literature; impediments to learning; cultural literacy; and the influence of television and other media. Subsequent discussion focused first on the study of language, then on the practices of oral and written composition, and finally on reading in general and on reading literature in particular. The conference concluded by examining the education of teachers at all levels. A skeletal outline of the plan is included as Appendix B, but the topics did not sort out as neatly as the plan, and conference participants

were increasingly concerned with the relations among the topics. The steering committee met regularly during the conference and adjusted the program and schedule as necessary.

The theme "Democracy through Language" emerged as a result of the discussions, not as part of the plan. Conference participants confirmed the importance of the humanities generally and the specific value of English studies in the education of citizens who live in a democratic and increasingly complex information society. They noted:

Unless students know how to read and write, they will not be able to assimilate, evaluate, and control the immense amount of knowledge and the large number of messages produced every day. The development of new media similarly requires of citizens an enhanced ability to use different ways of reading and writing, and language arts instruction has an important role to play here as well.

Making literacy a possibility for all students became a priority, and the group concluded that the interactive classroom described later in this introduction provides the best environment for achieving this goal.

Two other related goals also grew out of the group's emphasis on the social value of English studies: encouraging students to articulate their own points of view, and encouraging them to respect different perspectives. Conference participants agreed that:

Citizens of a democracy must be able to appreciate diversity even as they advocate their own beliefs about what is good and true. Teaching students how and why different ways of reading can find different meanings in the same text can provide important experience in understanding and appreciating opposing perspectives. Learning about the many different kinds of writing and ways of thinking which are the subject matter of the language arts curriculum can expand the capacity of students to imagine and value worlds other than their own. The ability to communicate their views in oral and written form and to listen with comprehension to the views of others is also indispensable to citizens in a democratic society, and enhancing this ability is a major aim of language arts education.

Achieving these goals, conference participants decided, called for a fresh view of the field. For many years, English teachers at all levels of schooling have thought of English studies as a tripod, one of whose legs was language, another writing, and the third literature. Though the usefulness of this metaphor has been questioned over the years, it has remained influential, focusing attention necessarily on subject matter, on the objects scholars and critics read and study, and on the thing — language — out of which those objects are made. Such a

metaphor does not specify classroom context, and it leaves open or blank the roles of both teachers and students. It seems fair to say that when people filled in these blanks, they were likely to see teachers acting as givers of knowledge, which students receive — more or less passively.

Though unarticulated as such, the tripod conception of English studies clearly influenced the initial division of the conference program into segments on language, writing, and the study of literature, even though during the planning process, representatives from the elementary and secondary schools expressed dissatisfaction with such an arrangement. By the end of the conference, however, the tripod and its presumption of an untroubled transmission of expertise from teacher to pupil had faded, and a more interactive, learning-centered view of English studies had emerged. With the advantage of hindsight, one might say that conference participants took the tripod, the content of English studies, for granted (or almost for granted) and concentrated on filling in what the old metaphor left out.

First, conference participants saw English studies as including a broader range of activities than the tripod suggests and talked about the English teacher's need to foster student learning in reading, writing, interpreting, speaking, and listening. They thought that encouragement of these abilities, which the college strand called the "arts of language," should continue throughout a student's education — from the elementary school to the university — developing in a recursive fashion so that the more advanced students (and their teachers along with them) would keep returning to first questions, but from progressively more sophisticated perspectives and with continually expanding bases of knowledge. Viewing English studies as a continuum from the earliest grades through undergraduate study made it easy for participants to use the term *language arts* interchangeably with *English studies*. During the conference and in this report, these terms are used synonymously and refer to the same sets of abilities.

Second, conference participants viewed the formal, school study of English as only one place where people learn to use and understand their language. In this view, schools provide a special place — and a critical opportunity — for students to continue a process that begins outside school with parents, other adults, and peers, and goes on both outside and in school. The sensitive integration of what students study formally with what they bring to the classroom from outside it was considered desirable for all students, but particularly valuable for those whose home and neighborhood uses of language differ significantly from those which they encounter in school.