

## The Future of Teaching "English"

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**I am one who worries about definitions, and the word in the title of this article that needs definition is English.** There are at least two major divisions in practice: writing and literature. Writing **divides in turn into three areas for us who teach in institutions of higher learning:** composition, by which is generally meant those courses of a general nature instructing students in correct and effective writing, regardless of their major or intended lifework; applied composition, **a term I use for instruction by which students in the sciences and technological subjects or those in media studies (like journalism or television or editorial work) or those in business learn more specific means of effective communication; and** creative writing.

**I assume that** writing is not the definition of English **that many people find in my title; they instead read** literature. I raise the issue because it is my strong conviction that departments of English should not abdicate their function in the area of writing (even when schools of journalism or communication exist on campus). Perhaps the major problem in executing this function, however, is the faculty: Too many do not want to teach composition, too few are capable of handling specific applications because of a lack of experience, and too many in the creative area seem to have little relationship to the

intellectual world around them except as it relates to themselves. (There is also the problem of the “non-compositional” faculty—those exclusively teaching “literature”—who look down on any in the writing area, including most curiously the creative writer. I have repeatedly observed that few from the non-writing faculty attend readings of poets or novelists, even those given by some of our most celebrated, and even those by their colleagues.) The future of English is going to mean more faculty committed to teaching writing, development of a true cadre of composition teachers, an alteration in teaching-assistant programs (in which most of the antipathies toward teaching writing come into existence), and always imagination.

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**But if the word English means literature, uncertainties have been created by extensive divisioning into related studies and literary studies. On the one hand, there are the separations of concerns dealing with film, folklore, linguistics, critical systems, interdisciplinary studies, or areas such as gender studies, cultural studies, and African American studies. The English department has become a composite of all of these areas, although a few schools have divorced some, such as linguistics, from centrality in the department through a**

**consortium or even a separate department.**

**This separation hasn't occurred in all schools. Smaller colleges have a different problem from that in the larger universities, of course, but it seems to me that the adequate, let alone successful, future of teaching English is going to depend on faculty who are able to provide such studies as those enumerated above, either on a rather full scale or on an informed integrative scale. In the smaller schools, such studies can be significant through either fundamental courses (not "token" courses), some of which might even be required, or through integration into courses not devoted to those particular studies.**

**An example may be helpful. I note a recent personal experience. I conducted an "English" course in the British seventeenth-century milieu a few semesters ago that worked out of the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century and well into the eighteenth century, and brought in quite often the American colonies, with a side look at what was happening in France and the Germanies. The course did not include as basic reading what many people might consider "literature," for poetry, drama, and prose narrative were not included except as we related those works to our discussion or as students examined in papers the effect of our syllabus upon the reading of one or more literary examples.**

**I think my students, by their study of the theories of the earth, of deism, and of the codification of science, are much better equipped to understand what Alexander Pope and the neoclassicists were doing and espousing than are**

**those who simply read** Essay on Man or Gulliver's Travels. **Similarly, George Herbert's "The Country Parson" informs his poetry in** The Temple, as do the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne; and understanding of the City (as gleaned from John Stow) and of economic issues that Gerard Winstanley's work or James Harrington's The Commonwealth of Oceana **lay forth provides necessary background for an intelligent reading of Richard Head's early "novel" The English Rogue.**

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**It should be clear to the imaginative teacher—one who doesn't repeat simply what he or she did as a graduate student—how film and certain kinds of linguistic material and surely critical systems can be incorporated into courses that are more traditionally "literary." In the course I am describing, I did not give up "literature" for a nonliterary course in the advancement of philosophy and science, or the jockeying of religious and political forces and ideologies; for I did lay stress on the development of the essay, the utopia, and the non-fictional narrative, as well as literary critical oppositions and their sources. But the future of teaching "English" is going to depend on our remembering**

**that we are teaching literature, not anthropology or Marxist economics.**

**A great problem that we as teachers of “English,” of “literature,” have experienced in the past and that we should try to derail for our younger colleagues was just stated: Too many teachers are limited by what they did when they were in school, particularly in graduate school. Still another bifurcation of our discipline (again with contribution from many graduate schools) has altered English into British or American or World literature, and then further into non-white, non-male and non-masculinist, and non-Western European literature, but many current teachers are unequipped to handle anything but the most limited and usually chronological understanding of English-language literature. We don’t encourage ourselves to break out of the mold we’ve been made in, so how can we encourage our students?**

**We seem to think we have to have studied whatever we teach very well before we talk about it in a classroom, rather than often learning along with the students, rather than having the light bulb come on for us, too, in class. Having read John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* once and prepared it for class, perhaps the teacher will do an excellent job teaching it—since she or he has often read and studied *The Grapes of Wrath*—and through discussion inspire some of the students to read the unassigned work as well. A chance reference to the source of Steinbeck’s title—Satan’s multi-interpretable remark in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 104—may add a dimension for students that J. C.’s rousing address will reinforce.**

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**Similar socioeconomic and compositional discussions will ensue, whichever work is the assignment for the day. There will be significant differences if one doesn't do Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and instead assigns Ann Petry's The Street, but what are the aims in teaching either? Some of those aims will overlap. Perhaps this sounds only as if I'm in the realm of canon-busting—and it should be clear that I think canon should be busted by employing neglected works by white, male, English-speaking writers as well as by non-white, non-male, Other-speaking writers—but I also mean to imply that varied approaches and reading lists should depend on a course's specific aims. And not all aims have to be chronological or generic or historical or agenda-ridden.**

**Either of the Steinbeck novels mentioned above would serve well in chronological or generic or historical courses, but either would also serve well in a course where the aim is to examine socioeconomic and political issues, or to study influences on a work or author (as with novels inspired by and related to the Bible and its teachings). The same can be said of Anderson's or**

**Petry's works, but they also serve differing aims for a study of the grotesque (there are grotesques in *The Street*) or "religionism" or hope and delusion. Indeed, *The Street* is a wonderful, little-known example for a course in the urban novel or African American literature or women's writing or cultural studies.**

**The future of the teaching of English, I think, rests fully upon the teachers, but that raises questions about the attitudes of graduate faculties and their usual narrowness. The study of English, as I envision it, can allow for a literature course in gender studies or in seventeenth-century British poetry or in the novel, including French, Spanish-American, Japanese, and British and American examples. It should consider, however, two things: attention to literature (and one keeps feeling that some of our literary critics in English are only anthropologists or sociologists who don't really like literature) and a curriculum that both prescribes some basic work (though difficult to identify, this might be broad enough to encompass numerous critical sensibilities) and creates great freedom of choice at the same time. It suggests that an anthology can be used but that potential abuse must be countered by wide selection within the anthology and by adequate amplification outside that text.**

**The future of the teaching of English is going to depend on not succumbing to fads—while incorporating what is worthwhile in the fad, on diverting a takeover of the department (or of some of our "trade" periodicals) as a sociology or politics or criticism unit—while incorporating what is worthwhile for the study of literature in each approach (or subject), and on**

**recognizing that literature of the English-speaking world continues to have worth—though it interfaces with other language groups and though other language groups are encouraged to assert their presence as entities as well.**

**I have not commented on the old chestnut of teaching or research, sometimes known as “publish or perish,” sometimes more accurately known as “publish and perish.” The question is really in the yardsticks used to evaluate those two aspects of the college teacher’s career: Publication can be quantified and more easily evaluated than teaching can. The instruments of student evaluation of teaching that many schools use are not good, and too often they are misused by students who are not truly capable of teacher evaluation. But even so, good teaching is often simply not rewarded by institutions, neither by promotion and tenure nor by improvement of remuneration and other perquisites nor by the kind of search and appointment that the published scholar is able to command. Unfortunately, all of those things are too often true in too many cases.**

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stress publication and some who may thus stress teaching. What we need is to remember, too, that the good teacher is one who keeps up with knowledge in the field or field professed. . . ."

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**Still, I protest the flimsy popularizations that the old chestnut offers as truth; there are good teacher who publish, and there are publishing scholars who are good teachers. Being a good teacher (by whatever criteria are used, though their delineation defies agreement, it seems) should always be required for any appointment, promotion, tenure, or remunerative improvement. That is a bottom line. What we need are administrators who will recognize that teaching (not only "outstanding," whatever that is) deserves such recognitions. What we need are stated promotional criteria for each individual, some who may thus stress publication and some who may thus stress teaching. What we need is to remember, too, that the good teacher is one who keeps up with knowledge in the field or field professed—I am not only tired of but also annoyed by the teachers who still think the focus of Paradise Lost is Book IX (the Fall) and that Books V and VI, and XI and XII, are not really important. It is not necessary to be a publishing scholar to keep up with knowledge in one's field, but more who publish seem to be aware of, say, the centrality of Ascension Day to William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury than are those who don't.**

**The topic of these last remarks is far from new, but they point directly to a significant aspect of the future of the “English” department. I’m not sure that the future of teaching English is very rosy as far as this factor of teaching/publication is concerned. But I say this, not because most out there do not recognize the need to reward good teaching, but because not only administrations but also faculty members allow themselves to be hoodwinked into thinking that popularity with students is sufficient and that the latest buzz will bring that necessary popularity. Being popular is an asset, but it does not equate with good teaching; we can only idealistically hope that good teaching will bring popularity. It very often has.**

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